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THE CIVIL WAR: A COLLABORATION IN DIRECTION AND CHOREOGRAPHY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May 2005

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## **Abstract**

### THE CIVIL WAR: A COLLABORATION IN DIRECTION AND CHOREOGRAPHY

By Cara Elizabeth Rawlings, M.F.A.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Major Director: David S. Leong  
Chairman, Department of Theatre

This text is a partial record of the development of the Virginia Commonwealth University production of *The Civil War: A Musical* that opened on April 7, 2005 for a three-week run ending April 28, 2005. The greater part of the text is devoted to the evaluation of the underlying principles of direction and choreography applied in the creation of an artistically and financially successful production of this size. Included in the evaluation of *The Civil War: A Musical* are analyses of the directors' -- Patti D'Beck and David Leong -- individual creative processes, aesthetics, and working styles. The result of this evaluation and analysis is a compilation of the fundamental principles of direction and



choreography applied in *The Civil War: A Musical* as a methodology for the creation of theatre. Further reflections on collaboration and artistry serve as the culmination of lessons inherent in both the creation of the Theatre VCU production of *The Civil War: A Musical* and in the author's three years of study in the VCU Master of Fine Arts program in Theatre Pedagogy with an emphasis in Movement Direction and Choreography.

## INTRODUCTION

This text is a partial record of the development of the Virginia Commonwealth University production of *The Civil War: A Musical* that opened on April 7, 2005 for a three-week run ending April 28, 2005. The greater part of the text is devoted to the evaluation of the underlying principles of direction and choreography as applied in the creation of an artistically and financially successful production of this size. Included in my evaluation of *The Civil War: A Musical* are the analyses of the directors' -- Patti D'Beck and David Leong -- individual creative processes, aesthetics, and working styles. Patti identifies herself primarily as a dance choreographer. David is known as one of the top Fight Directors and Movement Directors in professional theatre. Neither Patti nor David considers the position of Director as her and his primary vocation. Yet, the fundamentals of direction are inherent in both of their approaches to movement choreography. The goal of this text is to define the fundamental principles of direction and choreography applied in *The Civil War: A Musical* as a methodology for the creation of theatre.

The VCU production of *The Civil War: A Musical* and this text are the vehicles for the actualization of all the lessons I have learned during my three years of movement, acting, pedagogy and overall theatre studies at VCU. My own voice, as a teacher and artist, is present throughout this text, ever assessing my contributions and development as both part of and separate from that of Patti and David. The following pages describe *The*

*Civil War: A Musical* as not only the evolution of one of the most successful productions staged at Theatre VCU, but also a testament to the evolution of my own artistry and the culmination of my work in the VCU Master of Fine Arts program in Theatre Pedagogy with an emphasis in Movement Direction and Choreography. My hope, in writing this thesis, is to pass on some insight to the fundamental principles, techniques and pitfalls of direction and choreography -- and to demystify the reality of true collaboration.

**Chapter I: *THE CIVIL WAR: A MUSICAL:***  
**FROM BROADWAY DEBUT TO VCU**

Academic theatre is a singular breed of theatre. Though the task of choosing four plays for a typical theatre production season in the not-for-profit or commercial theatre may be challenging; academic theatre presents an entirely different set of challenges that must be addressed in the development of a production season. Academic theatre requires each play meet specific criteria serving the interests of both the student body and academic administration. When considering a particular show, theatre faculty must weigh factors including: student parental approval of content; departmental talent pool; the play's marketing potential in the greater community; and possible effects the play may have on the reputation of the academic institution. In the consideration of a final show for the 2004-2005 production season, the faculty of Theatre VCU weighed all these factors and more. *The Civil War: A Musical*, written by Frank Wildhorn, Gregory Boyd and Jack Murphy, satisfied the faculty's major elements of consideration. The production is a family-oriented ensemble piece requiring a large multi-racial cast to perform a story based on historical events dear to the greater Richmond, Virginia community. *The Civil War: A Musical* was an ideal choice to end a well-rounded Theatre VCU production season that included *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* by Steve Martin, *Big Love* by Charles Mee and *Metamorphoses* by Mary Zimmerman.

David Leong began his affiliation with Frank Wildhorn and *The Civil War: A Musical* in 1999 as fight director for the Broadway production. I once joked with David about the coincidence that Theatre VCU seasons usually include at least one show in which David served as the fight or movement director of the professional debut. He laughed and said he had always thought *The Civil War: A Musical* was perfect for Theatre VCU on many levels – coincidence or not.

Discussing his reasons for choosing *The Civil War: A Musical*, David admitted the original script was not well developed. Regardless, he always had faith director Patti D'Beck could overcome the show's original shortcomings. Over the course of Patti's career as a dancer, actor, and choreographer in more than 13 Broadway shows, she worked closely with great choreographers and directors such as Bob Fosse, Michael Bennet, Tommy Tune, Jeff Calhoun, and Graciela Daniele. She has personally coached actors Bernadette Peters, Tommy Tune, Sandy Duncan, Keith Carradine, Lucy Arnaz, and Rosie O'Donnell to name a few. With additional credits as a performer, choreographer and director in off-Broadway, regional theatre, summer stock and television productions, Patti would lend both artistic and professional credibility to the Theatre VCU production of *The Civil War: A Musical*, its cast, and ultimately the entire theatre department. David was confident in Patti's abilities to rework and direct *The Civil War: A Musical* in a way that would allow the mediocre script meet the ideal casting needs, financial needs and marketing needs of Theatre VCU.

The roles in *The Civil War: A Musical* were written as archetypal images of the common soldier, the women left behind during the war and both free and bound slaves.

All of the archetypes were age- appropriate for the majority of performance majors. The fact the script called for African-American actors to play the roles of the slaves allowed racially diverse casting. David is committed to choosing multi-racial shows so that the Theatre VCU production seasons are a reflection of the diverse student body and Richmond community. Not only does that policy promote diversity, but it also opens performance opportunities to nearly one-half of the department performance majors who happen to be African-American.

The casting needs of *The Civil War: A Musical* ultimately benefited the Theatre Department in ways David and Patti had not foreseen. David and Patti cast thirty-one students in the show, many who happened to be freshmen and sophomores and from other departments like Psychology and Music. The type and number of students in *The Civil War: A Musical* were an anomaly in a Theatre VCU main stage production where the majority of actors are usually Junior and Senior B.F.A. Performance majors. The enthusiasm and diligence of a younger and more diverse cast brought about a greater awareness of the show among the VCU student body and faculty. Ticket sales increased due, in part, to the word-of-mouth generated by the large cast, their families and teachers. Student retention will be affected on some scale by the fact that so many students were given the opportunity to perform so early in their careers at Theatre VCU.

Looking at David's actions on a grander scale, it is evident he chose *The Civil War: A Musical* primarily as part of an overall business strategy to increase the reputation and visibility of Theatre VCU within the university, among the ranks of VCU administration and in the larger Richmond community. In the last two years, Theatre VCU has drastically

increased its marketing efforts in the community through greater publicity of the Guest Artist Series, the production seasons, and workshops for area theatre teachers. David's plan to produce *The Civil War: A Musical* served to boost Theatre VCU's visibility in the community by capitalizing on the fact that Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy.

The state of Virginia is littered with Civil War battlefields and museums. David's business plan included his courtship of all organizations involved in Civil War preservation, education or reenactment. His campaign resulted in a successful three and one half week run including several sold-out high school matinee performances and two encore performances for VCU administration and the Richmond Mayor's office. In a recent conversation, David said he had anticipated, "the content of this musical would resonate in the community and draw some people in who may not ordinarily step on campus." David was correct in his assertion that the *subject* of the musical would resonate with the Richmond audience, but the development of the actual *content* of a successful script proved to be a very tedious process, indeed.

## EVOLUTION OF THE THEATRE VCU SCRIPT

Composer Frank Wildhorn penned *The Civil War: A Musical* as part of a life-long campaign to bridge the gap between theatre and popular music (Evans 8). His musicals, including *Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Dracula*, are all musically based in the contemporary pop palette reminiscent of his earlier work as a songwriter for stars like Whitney Houston and Kenny Rogers. Though his productions have been popular with New York tourists and the general public, Broadway musicals conceived as popular music do not often survive the discerning eyes of the critics. In fact, *The Civil War: A Musical* was Wildhorn's worst Broadway casualty, closing after only two months. When Wildhorn and his co-creators Gregory Boyd and Jack Murphy pared down the script for the national tour, the production became little more than a pop concert complete with risers and an onstage band -- not a viable theatrical musical. Even so, the national tour ran for 80-weeks and actually turned a profit (McKinley E1).

Since David worked on the Broadway production, he knew the strengths and weaknesses of each production in the show's tenuous track record. Understanding the script would have to be reworked to solve its previous issues, David called Frank Wildhorn to ask permission to alter the script for VCU's production. Wildhorn gave David carte blanche to alter the script, and even gave David some sheet music for songs not included in the printed score. Patti D'Beck had her work cut out in sifting through all the material Wildhorn provided in order to create a theatrically interesting and workable concept for the VCU production of *The Civil War: A Musical*.



Patti enlisted David's help in devising a script based on three different versions of the show: The Alley Theatre, Broadway, and national tour scripts. The Alley Theatre script was originally intended as an "emotional landscape" that included more than twenty-five songs and snippets of monologues taken from the writing and oration of Fredrick Douglass, Walt Whitman, Abraham Lincoln, and letters written by Union and Confederate soldiers (Evans 8). In the Broadway script, Wildhorn, Boyd, and Murphy attempted to create a more narrative linear musical typical of the Broadway genre. When neither format of the show was successful, Wildhorn and his cohorts accepted the fact that the individual songs, rather than a cohesive story, would be the only possible focus of a national tour script. All three versions contained hints of a possible through-line and dramatic tension, but none actually succeed in finding it.

Patti remembered seeing the Broadway show in 1999 and but not being moved by it. Yet, when she first considered directing the show, she listened to the recording and was surprised the music stirred her emotions. She was determined to develop a script that was true to the emotional resonance and imagery she discovered in the recording.

In the Broadway production, Wendell K. Harrington created projections to signify the time and place of each scene. Patti remembered liking the projections, but found them overpowering and counteractive to a story about the very human and intimate realities of the Civil War. She knew she wanted to use some projections, but wasn't sure how to incorporate them.

Patti relies on research to provide inspiration for a "hook." Patti learned this basic choreographic principle early in her career working as a performer with director and

choreographer Michael Bennett who defines his primary choreographic tool -- the hook -- as, “some sort of concept, stylistically or in terms of the particular plot, or where the number is happening, of the style of movement that leads [us] to some form of structure” (Grody 96). Explaining a choreographic hook, Patti recounts working with Jeff Calhoun on “The Hand Jive” in the Broadway revival of *Grease*. She and Jeff choreographed the entire number prior to rehearsal. When they went in to teach the choreography, they were told the parameters of the soda shop set would not allow for large dance movements. Everyone basically had to sit in one place during the whole number. Patti and Jeff were stumped. They watched the cast sitting around on the set talking to one another and were suddenly aware that the physical interaction between the actors – nodding heads, animated hands and faces, and adjustments in sitting positions – were incredibly interesting. That type of interaction became the hook for choreography based in small conversation-type movements and a sort of paddy-cake game between actors. The hook is the idea that drives the piece.

Patti says the hook is her key to working on a show or a number. She did extensive research on the daily lives of soldiers, women, and slaves during the Civil War era. The images and stories she collected became the inspiration or hooks for her development of the script and -- as detailed later in this text --for the development of each musical number.

In her research Patti read about Matthew Brady, the famous wartime photographer. She then read the authors’ notes from *The Alley* production that were housed in the Lincoln Center Library where she found mention of the show as a scrapbook. The connection between Matthew Brady and pictures in a scrapbook were her hook for what

became our first script. It was based on the very intimate concept of Matthew Brady guiding the audience through his scrapbook of the war. Patti described the concept as equivalent to going through an old trunk of pictures you find in your grandparents' attic. The projections would be pictures and portraits from Matthew Brady's scrapbook or trunk that would come to life as the actors began to play out the scene. The impression would be that each musical number was part of a memory captured in a picture until it came to life on stage. She was going to have the stage surface treated to look like a collection of old portraits, pieces of yellowed paper and letters to look like the pages of a scrapbook. Once Patti had defined her hook, she began to compile the script.

In compiling the script, Patti made decisions based on several factors. First, she was adamant there must be no blackouts in the show. The transitions between scenes must be seamless and cinematic. David once described the cinematic approach to theatrical transitions: "The second scene should start almost before the first one has ended. Like in film, someone begins to talk off screen and the camera pans from one scene to the middle of a scene that is already happening. Michael Kahn and JoAnne Akalaitis taught me to look at transitions in a cinematic way. One scene blends right into another." The professionalism and artistry of a production are based on the seamlessness of transitions between scenes.

The second factor in Patti's script development was the necessity for a dramatic arc or build in the overall story. She had to figure out the beginning and the end of each musical number, act, and the overall show. David describes the dramatic arc as the result of cause and effect. Each event happens because the last event caused it. A dramatic build

is inherent in the continual relationship between cause and effect. David's approach to the dramatic build is primarily based in the logical connection of events; where as Patti's approach is primarily based in the rhythmic balance of the show. She arranged the numbers to ensure variance of rhythm. Patti explained her reasoning: "If we have two big old group numbers, we have to go small now. The whole show is written in the time signature 4/4 so how do we arrange things to shake people up and keep them awake?"

The final factor influencing Patti's script decisions was the element of surprise. The Broadway show had ended the first act with "How Many Devils?" Patti didn't think that ending worked because it telegraphed the events in Act II. "How Many Devils?" is an angry, driving number in which the soldiers sing about the disillusionment, fatigue, monotony and hopelessness in fighting an endless war. Of course, the audience knows how the war ended so there would be no need for a second act at that point. They would know what to expect when they returned from intermission. In order to maintain some element of surprise and interest in Act II, Patti wanted to end Act I with the slaves' big gospel number, "Someday." With lyrics like, "We're gonna celebrate our independence day, Someday!" the song would end the act on a more energetic and hopeful note.

Once Patti developed a script she was happy with, she presented it to David. He suggested a few changes including ending Act I with "How Many Devils?" David thought that ending on a harsher note would be more dramatically interesting. Patti made the adjustment and distributed her final script to the production team. The first scene in the script began as Matthew Brady set up the first photograph of two men. As the lights went down, Brady's flash went off and the men began to sing the first song, "Brother, My

Brother.” The following is a list of the order of songs and scenes in Patti’s version - our first version - of the script for the VCU production of *The Civil War: A Musical*:

<u>Act I</u>	<u>Act II</u>
• Brother, My Brother	• Judgment Day Reprise
• A House Divided	• Virginia
• By the Sword/Sons of Dixie	• Candle in the Window
• The Auction	• Oh! Be Joyful!
• The Peculiar Institution	• The Ambush
• If Prayin’ Were Horses	• Five Boys
• Missing You (My Bill)	• You Picked the Wrong Day Mister
• Military Crossover	• Find Me
• Greenback	• Prayin’ Reprise
• Judgment Day	• River Jordan
• Tell My Father	• Sarah
• Freedom’s Child	• The Honor Of Your Name
• Brother, My Brother Reprise	• Northbound Train
• I Never Knew His Name	• Last Waltz for Dixie
• Father, How Long?	• Freedom’s Child Reprise
• Someday	• The Glory
• I’ll Never Pass This Way Again	
• How Many Devils?	

Patti completed her script just before Christmas 2004 in preparation for our first rehearsal scheduled January 18, 2005. After the holiday break, David called me to explain that he and Patti had decided to co-direct the show since Patti had to delay her return to Richmond to handle some family obligations. He scheduled a meeting with all members of the production team for the second week of January to talk through the script and any changes that needed to happen before we began rehearsal. Patti joined us a few times via speakerphone in a series of script meetings where she and David, Musical Director Blanton Bradley Jr., Theatre VCU Assistant Chair Gary Hopper, Stage Managers Emily Watson

and Jo Bachman, Assistant Director Jessica Smith, and I all worked collaboratively to develop a final rehearsal script.

## EVOLUTION OF THE REHEARSAL SCRIPT

*The Civil War: A Musical* marked my first opportunity to take part in the script development of a play. The process required numerous readings of the script. After reading Patti's script, David and Patti realized it still had the flavor of a musical montage or revue even though the structure of events was more linear. In our first meeting, David proposed a solution to the format disparity -- we could simply approach the show as a concert production similar to the Alley Theatre production. That strategy would eliminate the need for transitions between the numbers. With such a mammoth show on our hands, it did not sound like a bad idea. Even so, none of us, including David, were really inspired by the concert format. I voiced my opinion that we could only pull off a concert version if we had phenomenal singers. Realistically, only six out of thirty-one cast members had strong enough voices to stand alone in a concert-type of situation. We all agreed our strengths would be in acting and musical staging. Neither the written material nor the voices were strong enough to emotionally impact the Richmond audience unless we held to a linear storyline the audience could follow.

Since David had received prior authorization from Wildhorn, we set about reworking Patti's script to play more to the strengths and talent of Theatre VCU. Our goal was to develop a linear storyline based on the dramatic principles of rhythm, tempo,

contrast, logic, and action. In his book *Backwards and Forwards*, David Ball refers to *action* as the clear sequence of cause and effect -- the building blocks of dramatic structure (10).

We spent more than a week, working five to six hours a day, developing an active script with a definite dramatic structure. In order to define and simplify the action in the script, we ended up cutting anything that was not necessary. David constantly reminded us, “Each event can only happen if it is the result of a prior event.” With that in mind, we eliminated entire verses of songs like “Judgment Day,” “Peculiar Institution,” and others to get to the action in the song. When verses repeated, we scrutinized the score to see if they could also be cut. Our adjustments ultimately provided a dramatic form in which the songs no longer existed independent of one another. Each song, event, and scene became essential to the complete story of *The Civil War: A Musical*.

## ACT I

The first moment in a scene, act, or full production of a play, is the most crucial to successful storytelling. The first moment lets the audience know the type and content of the story and the language in which it will be told. The first moment in a journey must be exciting enough to provoke a desire to continue the journey. The last moment of a show, like the last moment of a journey, is crucial to the audience’s determination of the intellectual and emotional significance and ultimate satisfaction of the experience. The last

moment allows the audience to explore the destination and the journey they and the characters took to get there.

As we approached the first moment of the show we knew we needed a strong beginning to grab the audience's attention and to set the pace for the rest of the show. *The Civil War: A Musical* was a more dynamic and epic story than was justified by beginning the show with an intimate activity such as Matthew Brady setting up a portrait of a Union and Confederate captain. We discussed the purpose the character Matthew Brady served. David introduced the questions that were to be the basis of all our decisions: "Is it necessary?" and "How does it help to move the action forward?" In the end, we decided to cut the character of Matthew Brady for the following reasons:

1. If a character is only used as a device to move from one scene to another, it becomes a gimmick or an easy way out for the directors.
2. In order for a character to guide the audience through a story, the audience must care about the character enough to want to take his or her journey.
3. There was no time or need to develop Matthew Brady's character or his connection to the story without exposition and more writing on our part.
4. Ultimately, we needed to get into the show as quickly as possible. We needed to capture the audience's interest immediately. If a director gives an audience time to question what is happening or why they are there, the audience disengages because maintaining interest requires more energy than they want to or know how to give.



Once we cut Matthew Brady, we were free to develop the story instead of fixing on the individual character development. The assumption was, once we developed an active story, the characters would develop as a result of the action. In creating everything from a script to two minutes of choreography, the overall shape must be defined before the detail can be filled in. Patti refers to same idea as “painting the broad strokes first.” In essence, we made sure the broad strokes of the script were active; trusting the details of the scenes would fall into place. Focusing on the “what” rather than the “how” allowed us to move forward in defining the overall shape of the play.

In finding the most dramatic beginning, we had to identify where we had come from, which was nothing in this case, and where we were going? Was “Brother, My Brother” a necessary part of the story? After “Brother, My Brother” we were moving into “A House Divided,” the first big group number about the excitement soldiers felt as they left home to be heroes in a war they thought would last only two weeks. “Brother, My Brother” was simply an introduction to the two army captains and was not strong enough to launch us into “A House Divided.” Reminded of the need for dramatic action, we decided to cut “Brother, My Brother.”

Next we had to deal with the role of the Lincoln Voice Over. It begins, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” That made perfect sense as the beginning of the show. It not only introduced the situation, but inherent in the last line of Lincoln’s speech, “the Union will defend itself,” is the cause that precipitates the effect in boys leaving for war in “A House Divided.”

David suggested we add the sounds of military drums and cannon shot before the voice-over to jolt the audience and signify the beginning. Until then, I had never considered the mechanics involved in capturing an audience's attention. David's intuitive decision to add the drums and cannon worked to create more than a dramatic effect. It was a solution to three issues that must be addressed in dealing with an audience:

1. **Focus and Attention:** Audience chatter creates a certain energy and noise. The first moment must top that energy and noise in order to focus and quiet the audience. The energy of the first moment onstage must be dynamically different from that of the audience - in rhythm, tempo, or presence - in order to shift the attention to the stage.
2. **Direction:** The first moment must direct the audience how to listen to the show. The rhythm of the drum roll and shot built tension and anticipation for the next moment. Throughout the show, we used drums, music, and other sound effects to transition into scenes. The first moment introduced devices that would be used in moving from one moment to the next.
3. **Expectation:** An audience needs to understand the parameters of the world created onstage to know the reasonable expectations in that world. In helping audiences set expectations for the world of the play, we are less likely to disappoint them. The parameters of the show were defined by the technical conventions introduced in the opening sequence from the drum roll, to cannon shot, to the projection of Lincoln during the voice over, to the actors trickling onstage, to the split moment of stillness at the end of the voice over. The

conventions of music, sound effects, lighting, projections, entrances and tableaux were all present in the first few minutes of the show to establish the audience's expectations right away.

The most difficult challenge in developing a script is finding the first moment. Once we had established our basic rules for the production, we were off and running. We never specifically stated the rules that governed our script decisions. The process was so divinely collaborative; we simply asked questions in which the rules were unwittingly implied: What is this song about? What does this do to move things forward? Where have we come from and where are we going? What happens if we cut this? If we keep this does the next event make sense? What is least expected at this moment? All of our questions were based on the rules we were creating for ourselves: action, cinematic transitions, simplicity, surprise, and economic use of technical conventions.

In the Broadway script, Wildhorn, Boyd and Murphy included passages from several letters actually written by Confederate and Union soldiers. The passages became monologues that were inserted into the script at seemingly random points or perhaps to break the onslaught of constant ballads. In the middle of Act I, Fredrick Douglass and a group of slaves gave a rousing tribute to freedom in the song "Freedom's Child." The script read that the Union captain would then enter to perform a monologue (*read*: letter) about the horrible sights of war and sing a reprise of "Brother, My Brother" -- which would no longer be a reprise since we cut the first "Brother, My Brother." He would then exit, as a Nurse entered to perform another monologue, and sing the ballad "I Never Knew

His Name.” The entire sequence felt like someone pumping their foot on the brakes of a car while driving uphill.

Both Lochran’s and the Nurse’s monologues contained some emotionally poignant information we wanted to keep, but the monologues stopped the momentum of play. Since we had been on a script cutting spree, our initial reaction was to cut the scene altogether. Cutting the monologues and the reprise left us with more problems than solutions. It meant we would move from an upbeat group number in “Freedom’s Child” directly into the ballad “I Never Knew His Name,” despite that the audience had not yet met the characters in “I Never Knew His Name.” The song is a nurse’s lament to the soldiers that died in her care. The audience needed time to meet her before they could begin to empathize with her grief. The introduction of a new character to an audience is much like a meeting between two strangers. Both require time to get to know one another, develop interest in what each has to say, and even possibly grow to like each other before either agrees to take a journey together.

In our discussion about the cuts, Blanton mentioned the song required three nurses onstage to fulfill the three-part harmony written in the score. I suggested we keep the content, but change the form. Jessica Smith and I read the monologues in the form of a conversation between two nurses and a dying soldier. Gary Hopper said, “Go Lady C! You made it active.” Rewritten as a scene, the information was useful in creating an active transition between songs, allowing time for the development of a new character, while providing a reason for all three nurses to enter. By the time we got to the letters-as-

monologues in Act II, it was a given that I would rewrite those as well. Monologues are a viable part of dramatic structure if they are used for one of two reasons:

1. In order to explain details needed to understand the events that follow.  
Ex. The Prologue in *The Life of Henry the Fifth* summarizes the action to follow and instructs the audience how to follow the action (Shakespeare I.i.1-34).
2. As an insight to the psychological and emotional state of a character.  
Ex. In *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, Richard's opening monologue beginning, "Now is the winter of our discontent..." is crucial to the audience's understanding of his psychological and emotional state as cause for his later actions (Shakespeare I.i.1-40).

The monologues in the original script did not meet either criterion because they did not offer any information about the following events, nor were they written in an impersonal language that did not lend urgency or immediacy to the situation or the character. Inherent to the form of an ensemble piece, such as *The Civil War: A Musical*, is the fact the audience will not get to know one character more than another. That being the case, we worked to structure a script that would maintain the audience's interest in the overall story rather than veering off course to provide psychological and emotional insight into any one character.

## ACT II

The structure of the second act was much more unsteady than the structure of the first act had been. One challenge in approaching the second act was the fact twelve out of sixteen numbers were ballads written in the same 4/4 time signature. More than half of the ballads were solos. In addition, several songs were essentially identical in rhythm and story. Both “Freedom’s Child” in Act I and “River Jordan” in Act II were up-tempo ensemble numbers about the slaves’ journey to freedom. “Last Waltz for Dixie” and “Virginia” both lamented the former glory of the South. Act II presented a much more difficult challenge than Act I in our quest to develop an active and dramatically interesting story from a monotonous volley of pretty songs. Just as we had done for Act I, we began by examining the first and last moments of Act II. From there, we cut Act II to shreds in order to paste it back together in a form that made sense.

Earlier, we had decided the momentum of Act I would be best served by moving the African-American ensemble gospel song “Someday” from Act I to the start of Act II and cutting the Confederate captain’s solo “Northbound Train.” David suggested we start Act II with “Someday” to grab the audience and pull them back in after intermission.

As we read Act II again, we realized the resulting journey from “Someday” to “The Glory” was too unbalanced. We couldn’t start with such a high energy showbiz-type number then successfully move into the deadly sequence of twelve ballads. Instead, we switched “How Many Devils?” with “Someday” to give the act a more dynamic dramatic arc. The decision was based primarily on the elements of surprise and contrast. Ending

Act I with “Someday” allowed the audience to carry the energy from Act I through intermission to the beginning of “How Many Devils?” where the contrast between the two would jolt the audience and force them to pay attention. Through the use of contrast between the end of Act I and beginning of Act II, we essentially directed the audience where to focus their attention.

Contrast is one of the key choreographic elements always present in David’s work. In choreography, he is acutely aware of the need for contrast in rhythm and tempo to create focus on a certain part of a battle. As an example, he may choreograph a chaotic battle raging at full speed that suddenly changes to slow motion -- highlighting the climactic moment when the hero is killed. David’s innate understanding of the choreographic principles of contrast, logic, rhythm, tempo, flow, line, mass and form contribute to his notoriety as a choreographer able to cross over from realistic fight direction to stylized movement direction in a play or musical. The principles listed above are the same principles that determine successful direction. Whether we were conscious of it or not, those principles were the basis of most every decision made in development, rehearsal, and production.

One of the most difficult decisions we had to make was whether to cut or keep “Virginia” in Act II. It seemed almost blasphemous to produce *The Civil War: A Musical* in the state of Virginia and cut out the one song guaranteed to be a hit. David made the point that both “Last Waltz for Dixie” and “Virginia” served the purpose of signifying the defeat of the Confederacy. “Last Waltz for Dixie” was the stronger choice between the two because it provided insight to the Confederate soldiers’ emotional state toward the end

of the war. “Virginia” was a beautiful solo ballad, but it did not move the emotional or logical content of the story forward. No matter where we then tried to insert “Virginia,” we could not find a way to justify it as a cause or effect of anything else in the play -- It was only a pretty song. David finally made us move on and accept that it was not part of the show.

Cutting *Virginia* made me realize a profound part of the director’s work is knowing when to let go. One of both Patti’s and David’s greatest strengths is the ability to recognize when they are working too hard to make an idea work. Both have enough confidence in themselves, the production team, and the actors, to admit when an idea failed or when they don’t know how to fix a moment. By letting go of “Virginia,” we were free to find the parts of Act II that did work. We ended up cutting four more songs from Act II and rearranging other songs and dialogue as if we were putting pieces of a puzzle together.

The end of Act II and the play was actually missing a piece of the puzzle that we had to supply. “The Glory” included the battle David had staged in the Broadway version. The script already contained a battle in Act I, so we did not want to stage another battle. “The Glory” was the final number in the show and needed something dramatic and touching to match the build in the music. Again, we asked, “Where did we come from and where are we going?” At the point where the battle was supposed to happen, both armies were already onstage. We needed the rest of the cast, including the women and African-American ensemble, onstage for Fredrick Douglass’ final monologue and the closing moment where we planned to use projections of Civil War portraits to signify a tribute to those who died in the war. After discussing several uninspired ideas, we were no closer to



finding something to replace the battle. We decided to adjourn our meeting for the day in the hopes that something would inspire a solution.

David called me later that night and asked me to meet him at school the next day to talk through the script one more time. It seemed impossible that we might find anything else to cut or alter in, what felt like, the millionth reading of the script. Exhausted, but duty-bound, I agreed to meet him the following day. In that meeting, we finally solved the final moment of “The Glory.” I asked if we had to keep the battle music in the score. That would free us from having to meet the full intensity of the music. Instead, I suggested we skip the battle and move straight into Douglass’ monologue. I thought the rest of the cast could enter saying the battle names and number of fatalities as sort vocal underscoring to Douglass’ monologue about the outcome of the war. That would facilitate the entrance of the full company while adding energy to the monologue. David wasn’t sure about the battles as underscoring, but he loved the idea. We further developed the idea as a sort of battle montage in which the cast would enter one by one and say the name of a battle and its casualties while projections of battlefield photos would scroll across the projection screen mounted upstage of the actors. The idea seemed like the perfect set up for Douglass’ speech. We thought the montage would set the reverent tone we needed in order to honor the solemnity of Douglass’ speech about the end of the war. It was a relief to find what we hoped would be a theatrically interesting and emotionally engaging final moment for the show.

By the end of the rehearsal script development process, we had cut, shuffled and added so many moments; it is difficult to recount them all. The following is the final song list from the rehearsal script for Theatre VCU's production of *The Civil War: A Musical*:

<u>Act I</u>	<u>Act II</u>
• A House Divided	• How Many Devils?
• By the Sword/Sons of Dixie	• Candle in the Window
• The Auction	• Oh! Be Joyful!
• The Peculiar Institution	• The Ambush
• If Prayin' Were Horses	• Five Boys
• Missing You (My Bill)	• You Picked the Wrong Day Mister
• Military Crossover	• Prayin' Reprise
• Greenback	• River Jordan
• Judgment Day	• Sarah
• Tell My Father	• The Honor Of Your Name
• Freedom's Child	• Last Waltz for Dixie
• I Never Knew His Name	• Freedom's Child Reprise
• Father, How Long?	• The Glory
• Someday	

The completed script holds pieces of every person involved in, what was essentially the dramaturgical re-working of a formerly stagnant show as a new script that was engaging and dramatically interesting. The strength of the new script was a direct result of an extremely rare level of collaboration between David Leong, Patti D'Beck, Blanton Bradley, Jr., Gary Hopper, Jessica Smith, Emily Watson, Jo Bachman and me. Lynn M. Thomson, dramaturg and former VCU Guest Artist, defines collaboration as “a verb not a noun, a process of engagement, a map more than a destination. The process fosters a community of makers, who engender a shared vision, which in turn fuels individual creation. A single artist, working alone, cannot achieve that same vision and the

accompanying discoveries “(Thomson 118). I would add that productive collaboration and creativity are products of a solid structural foundation and defined parameters. It was only through an awareness of dramatic structure based in action, cinematic transition, simplicity, surprise, and economy that we were able to work together in the development of a sound script that would serve as our reference point for further collaboration and creativity as we began staging *The Civil War: A Musical*.

## **Chapter II: STAGING THE CIVIL WAR: A MUSICAL**

Rehearsals for *The Civil War: A Musical* began in January 2005. The directorial and choreographical principles involved in the three-month creative process are legion. Later in this text, I will attempt to define those principles exemplified in collaboration among the production team; in Patti and David's individual work; and the impact of those principles in my own future work as a director and choreographer. First, however, elements of the creative process itself must be defined.

As Associate Director and Choreographer, I was present as an assistant to both Patti and David. I spent the majority of the rehearsal period assisting Patti due to the sheer quantity and scope of production numbers she choreographed. David handled many of the solos, some duets, and most of the scripted scenes. This chapter provides a summary of the creative process in the evolution of nine numbers I was most intimately involved with - from conception of the ideas to actual staging of the songs. For the sake of clarity, the progression of each of the nine musical numbers is described in three stages:

1. Finding the Hook
2. Planning
3. Staging

The following summary is derived from the personal journal entries included in Appendix A detailing the evolution of the production from the first military training

rehearsal to opening night. Founded on personal observations, parts of the following text include sections of less formal language extracted from the aforementioned journal entries.

## PRE-PRODUCTION MILITARY EDUCATION

On January 15, 2005, most of the cast members, David Leong, Jessica Smith, Emily Watson and I took a field trip to Pamplin Historical Park near Petersburg, Virginia. The focus of the Pamplin exhibit is the story of the common soldier during the Civil War rather than that of the officers featured in most museums. We wanted to provide the actors with first-hand information about life during the Civil War and inspire morale among our own ranks. Earlier that week, I had spent two days studying with Dan Beasley, a Historical Guide from Pamplin on the proper military protocol for handling a rifle, bayonet, sword, and marching according to the manuals used during the Civil War. David arranged my training with Dan so I could provide him and Patti with basic military movement vocabulary as the show developed.

After our visit to Pamplin, David asked Dan to come to the first week of rehearsals to teach the actors the same information I had learned. In the end, Dan taught the actors not only how to perform drills with precision, but he also the lifestyle elements of military service during the Civil War. The week-long workshop allowed the actors time to develop a personal connection to being a soldier. They ultimately gained extensive technical knowledge and emotional understanding as the foundations of the next three months of work in *The Civil War: A Musical*.

## “A House Divided”

### The Hook:

“A House Divided” was my introduction to Patti’s creative process. First, she concentrates on the broad strokes of the piece. We had to know what the piece was about in order to define its shape in broad strokes. The essence of the song is the naivety, optimism, and excitement of young boys preparing to go to war. The arc of the story, or broad strokes, is the journey of young men as they hear about the war, enlist in the army, say goodbye to their families, and join the army ranks.

Once we had a story, we needed a hook to define how we would tell the story. The challenge was honoring the dramaturgical need for introduction of the main characters and their personal conflicts while telling the larger story about preparations for the war. David suggested we use freezes or tableaux to relay a passage of time. The tableaux would highlight events leading up to each soldier joining the army. The juxtaposition of the soloists moving in real time against the surrounding frozen figures would isolate each solo as a character’s private or internal moment. The tableaux were our hook.

### Planning:

Once we decided on the story and the hook, we began to fill in the details. Patti listens to music, as one would read a map. The music provides directions that illuminate when, where and how the action moves as it travels to its destination. Through counting and notation, we defined moments in the music that provided license to move in either slow or real time, or to freeze in tableaux.

Patti then asked, “What are the frozen moments? What are they doing in the freezes?” We talked through details of several stories that demanded emotional engagement from the actors: a couple getting married, two brothers fighting about allegiance to the North or South, tussles between people in recruitment lines, preparing new recruits. We developed a list of possible stories and the props they might need. The actors would flesh out their own stories, as well.

To find the end of the number, Patti and I planned the entrances at the beginning of the next song, “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie.” Knowing where the actors must go next in deciding their exit. The progression of the story required more formal movement to designate the formation of two armies. Each army formed two lines to face each other in a challenge. The armies then exited on opposite diagonals, leaving the focus on the captains standing center stage.

Patti is incredibly organized -- almost mathematical-- in her approach to direction and choreography. I quickly realized Patti’s intensive planning provided a structure that allowed her to play and be present with the actors during the staging process. In planning the actual staging of the number, Patti insisted we draw diagrams of each change in position, including correct spacing, lines, actors’ names, and their assigned stories. Though I initially balked at diagramming each moment in detail, I was amazed by how simply, expediently and collaboratively we were able to stage the full number with the actors.



### Staging:

Patti's first step in staging a number is to gather everyone involved in the piece and explain the story she is telling through choreography. When she is sure everyone understands the shape of the story and the emotional essence of the story, she begins staging the broad strokes.

Using the diagrams we drew, Patti and I placed everyone in their first positions, told them their stories, and let them work on their freezes. She walked around and asked the actors to define their emotional connections and actions in the frozen moments. At the same time, I walked around adjusting physical and spatial positions to create active freezes. David and I reminded them of the principles involved in creating freezes:

- Individual positions must be uncomfortable and require physical tension to maintain.
- The middle of an activity allows for a more interesting freeze than the beginning, end, or cliché highlight of the activity. For example, a picture of a man *as* he is falling is more intriguing than a man lying on the ground *after* falling.
- Body parts must be juxtaposed. For example, if the head turns to the right, the shoulders should turn to the left.
- Individual positions and spatial relationships must be asymmetrical.
- Triangles create more interesting and realistic spatial relationships than straight lines.

- Actors must “click” in and out of freezes to signify a suspension and resumption of time. A “click” is a surge of overall muscle tension moving in to the freeze and a quick surge and release of energy moving out of the freeze.
- Facial expressions must be fully animated and emotionally expressive.

We followed the same process in staging the next few diagrams. We created the broad strokes by developing the overall stage picture, then narrowed our focus to the physical action of the stories, then further narrowed our focus to define the emotional stakes of each frozen individual. As Patti and I concentrated on the stage pictures and logistics of moving from one picture to the next, David worked with the soloists to define the acting moments.

The final moments of the song were militarily formal. Patti’s, David’s, and my approach to staging the last section became unintentionally more formal and regimented as we drilled the actors on each step, stance, and pivot to ensure uniformity in movement. Though many actors grew exasperated with the constant repetition, they understood the need and reality of military precision. By drilling the movement in the first song Patti and David established the tone, pace, and expectations for the remainder of the show.

### “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie”

#### The Hook:

“By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie” is about the building anticipation and camaraderie among young recruits as they train for war. The song is written in a series of solos building into a full chorus of all the soldiers. The music dictated we tell the story of

boasting, excited and untrained boys becoming members of a precisely trained military unit. David and Patti decided to tell that story using images of military drills and formations. The soldiers' evolution from civilian demeanor to military formality was the hook.

### Planning:

Our greatest challenge was to move focus between the Union and Confederate armies as they alternated verses in the song. The music only provides four beats between Confederate and Union verses, so both armies had to be on stage through the whole number. Patti first needed to know how to "treat the space" to delineate the two armies and create the illusion each army was unaware of the opposing army's activities.

Based on the hook, we decided the first pictures would be more casual and asymmetrical. The rowdy young soldiers entered running in a swirling pattern to sing their first verse. Once we figured out the entrances, Patti and I diagramed potential traffic patterns in increasingly formal formations. The drawings were symmetrical and linear circle, box and triangle formations based on military images. Our ideas for moving the armies seemed feasible on paper, but Patti needed to see the bodies moving in space to be sure the formations worked. At the end of the second rehearsal of "A House Divided," we asked the soldiers to stay for ten minutes to work out the logistics of moving the groups as we diagrammed. Convinced the number would work as planned, we released the soldiers and turned to the detail of the number. Patti said, "This is pretty much yours since I don't know about swordplay."

David wanted to use drills from the *Manual of Arms* as choreography. I thought the process would be simple because the actors trained during the first week of rehearsal. In our final planning meeting for “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie,” Patti asked if I wanted to write down any sword or gun choreography. I said, “No, I think I’ll keep it simple.” Choreographing, counting and teaching such detailed movement through improvisation ended up being much more difficult than I thought.

Staging:

Patti began the first rehearsal, as always, telling the actors the story of the number. She completed the broad strokes by staging the sequence of formations. When the guys understood the shape of the entire number, Patti turned to me to fill in the detail with specific sword and gun choreography.

The first rehearsal of “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie” was a personal nightmare. I spent the better part of rehearsal wishing I had counted the music and written down choreography as Patti had suggested. I thought I would call out drills and the actors would perform them in time to the music. Instead, I spent ages working out the choreography in front of the guys as Blanton played the music over and over.

The episode emphasized the importance of planning details in a number as much as possible. Due to my ill preparation, I wasted rehearsal time and jeopardized my credibility with the actors and directors. Patti was patient and offered tremendous help in naming the counts of everything I choreographed. I was relieved when we were finally able to move on to the details of the individual stage pictures.

While staging the first few verses, Patti recognized my ability to create asymmetrical and realistic stage pictures. She heard me say, “Make an ‘L’ or ‘T’ in relation to each others’ shoulders, guys!” She laughed saying, “I’ve got it! I’ve got the secret!” She said she has never seen anyone who knows how to create stage pictures like David. My own approach to staging and choreography is largely based on lessons I learned studying with David. That knowledge allowed me to assist Patti when she needed help creating a more casual, asymmetrical, or life-like stage picture. She simply asked, “Cara, will you do that thing you do?”

David came in to see the rough draft of the number. He asked me to change some of the “dance-y” choreography to include more drilling from the *Manual of Arms*. He didn’t want their feet to move. Seeing I was confused by his request, he explained, “It speaks to the precision they have gained through drilling.” He also said I needed to choreograph more swordplay for the Union soldiers. Sabers are difficult to handle in such a tight area. More space is needed to gain momentum to swing the heavy blade. David helped find salute positions requiring less momentum of the swords. The actors were able to maintain control and precision without risking safety.

David was not happy with the first ending we choreographed. Each army sang the last verse as they marched around the edges of imaginary rectangles drawn stage right and left. The continuous movement dissipated the strength of the final moment. The music and dramatic arc of the number called for each soldier to look like a substantial member of an army going to battle.

Patti and David recalled liking the end of the Broadway staging. Patti asked me to notate the end of “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie” from a bootleg tape of the Broadway show. I taught our soldiers the punctuated movement in the Broadway version. The crisp movement of the weapons and relative stillness of their feet allowed the actors to be grounded, strong and emotionally engaged in the final moment.

### “The Peculiar Institution”

#### The Hook:

“The Peculiar Institution” was the first song in the show involving the African-American ensemble. The scene begins with Autolycus introducing a slave for auction. As his voice fades out, the slaves begin a series of solos describing heartbreaking moments in slavery. Patti explained the song as an internal moment in which the slaves are free to voice their stories. The series of events is much less concrete than in the first two songs because the slaves’ journey does not span place and time, but emotion.

In her research, Patti found visual images of slavery and personal stories that served as the basis for the hook. The hook for “The Peculiar Institution” was the emotional journey through iconic images of slavery derived from historical research, art, and film.

#### Planning:

After Patti described the emotional arc of the story, she showed me different bits of movement vocabulary she based on the number’s emotional essence. The song came “from the gut.” Undulations emanating from the center developed in virtual waves of grief as the

torso contracted and released. Patti created movement by abstracting slave activities like trudging in heavy shackles, pushing something heavy, working to exhaustion, and being beaten. She showed me a musicalized, rhythmically syncopated trudging step ending with her arms pulled behind her back as if her hands are in shackles. She says, “Maybe it’s too tap dance-y. What do you think?” I loved it.

We named sections according to intention in the music. The final section of music begins with the lyrics, “There must be an End!” It is such a powerful moment because the rhythm of the song changes from syncopation to a relentless, even and demanding cadence. To highlight the urgency of the section, Patti wanted to keep a few bars of music we cut in the script meetings. The bars were originally written as a musical interlude featuring three white women walking across the stage with parasols. Patti wanted to add the slower melodic interlude back in as a counterpoint to the final section. Patti envisioned the music as an angelic chorus of “oohs” and “ahhs” sung by actors backstage.

The slaves’ emotional progression built to the point where they were so hurt and dejected they hear angels that give them strength to carry on or fight back. The journey from pain to hope to defiance justifies the final musical section. As Sanford Meisner said, the pinch justifies the ouch (35). Patti’s idea is based on the principles of action/ reaction and logic.

Even though we loved her idea to add the music, the esoteric meaning might be lost in staging. I suggested the audience to might understand the voices are angels, if the slaves are physically and emotionally beaten to the edge of death. Patti agreed it would help the

audience associate the voices and white light with death. Finally, the actors end the song in their beginning positions on the auction block. The structure is a dream sequence.

Patti and I sat down to draw diagrams of each moment. At one point, I suggested we divide the men and women on opposite diagonals. The men and women would move toward each other when Bessie sings, “And they stole my man from my bed one night because his mistress decided he wasn’t polite and his eyes were disturbing.” The image was based on the discussions in gender studies about the threatening gaze of the black man. I suggested the actors actually turn that gaze to the audience. Patti and I worked out a diagram of the moment. Eventually, we realized a few sections of the song were too difficult to figure out on paper. We decided to leave some specifics for rehearsal.

#### Staging:

We began staging “The Peculiar Institution.” Patti gathered everyone together and talked through the shape and story of the number. She then placed the actors in their beginning positions on and around the auction block. Rather than completing the broad strokes, she began filling in the detail. Patti concentrated on finding three different standing positions for each actor. She was so definite about the exact spacing; she asked the Production Stage Manager, Emily Watson to tape numbers on the perimeter of the rehearsal floor as done in professional shows. Emily said we wouldn’t be able to tape the floor in Hodges Theatre, so it would not help the actors in the long run. Patti became a little frustrated.

One of Patti’s greatest strengths is her attention to detail. In staging the first moment, her greatest strength became her greatest weakness. She simply skipped the first



step in her usual creative process by moving to the detail work before she completed the broad strokes. The creative process became tedious and slow as we worked the minutiae of the moment. We needed to define what the moment on the auction block was about first. By the end of the first rehearsal, we were not happy with the way the number was shaping up and the staging was not finished.

Patti and I regrouped. Going back to her process, we planned the first picture more thoroughly. She and David realized we needed to thin out the beginning by starting with five people, rather than eleven, standing on and around the block. The others were grouped in areas downstage of the auction block as if they were in holding pens waiting to be sold.

Staging sped up once Patti found a solution to the beginning. We went back and staged the number in broad strokes to see if the different concepts and images would work. Patti and I tried to stage a few of my ideas, but we found them too complicated. The ideas did not work, as detailed in Appendix A, because they were often based on intellectual concepts abstracted through movement. My ideas lacked a strong connection to the emotion of the song. The power of the lyrics called for more visceral and simple movement.

Patti pared the number down during each rehearsal. As she grew more specific in the details of the piece, the actors found a deeper emotional connection to the song and their characters. When Patti added vocal sounds and breath to the movement, the exhaustion and pain was magnified for the audience as well as the actors. The first time they performed the number for the rest of the cast and crew was magical. The actors were

so engaged; everyone in the room had tears streaming down their faces. Few choreographers are able to physicalize such an intense emotional journey. “The Peculiar Institution” was the show’s finest example of Patti D’Beck’s direction and choreography.

### “Greenback”

#### The Hook:

The first time we talked about “Greenback,” Patti said, “I think it is a blanket story.” The song is a pimp’s sales pitch -- his *raison d’être*. Money can buy anything, particularly sex. David suggested Patti choreograph stylized or abstracted sexual encounters between the soldiers and the prostitutes. Patti’s solution was to have the guys hold a blanket up to hide the actual act. Depictions of sex behind the blanket were the hook. It was a great hook, our only challenge was to find a way to introduce and use the blanket as the prostitutes’ portable brothel – not a gimmick extraneous to the song.

#### Planning:

We actually did very little planning since the number was blocked as a scene, not a choreographed production number. Talking through the story, Patti said Ally has a gravity and sexiness that made her terrific as the jaded and worn prostitute who likes to push guys around and play the dominatrix. Angie often chooses sweet and innocent characters for auditions and class work. Patti and I decided she would be terrific as the less-experienced prostitute who is new to the game.

We had to decide whom each soldier was in order to know how he would deal with the prostitutes. As with Ally and Angie, we based the soldiers’ personalities and

relationships on the actors' attributes. Zach was large, boastful, and prone to breaking the rules. He would be the first to have sex with a prostitute. Danny was a bit of a playboy who thought he could handle women. The logical choice was for the woman to handle him – roughly -- instead. Jeff was a bit naïve, but talked a good game in order to look cool. He coached the other guys to engage with the prostitutes, while he worked up the nerve to do it himself. By then it was too late. Finally, Taylor was young, naïve, and unsure if he wanted to be with prostitutes. He was the awkward virgin the girls would actually enjoy defrocking.

Knowing each character and his point of view helped us figure out the sequence of events between the soldiers and the prostitutes. We only needed some play time to figure out how we could use the blanket most effectively.

#### Staging:

Patti began “Greenback” as she began the other numbers. She met with Adam, Ally, and Angie to talk through the story and shape of the number. She talked about the specifics of character development asking, “How long have you been together? What is your daily life like? What are your relationships to each other? How does each character feel about the other two?”

Patti told Ally and Angie about the character choices Patti and I had talked about earlier. It turned out their costume renderings presented each character opposite of what Patti and I had decided. The sketches of Angie's costume depict a haggard looking prostitute with slightly unkempt hair and clothes. Ally's sketches are closer to meeting the

sexy, innocent and young stereotype of a prostitute. Patti said, “Okay, so there’s a change. C.I.G. Change Is Good!”

While Patti worked the scene with Adam, Ally and Angie, I moved to the back of the room with Danny, Zach, Taylor, Jeff to work out some ways we could use the blanket. Patti was thrilled with the scenarios we created. Patti and I managed to block the entire number fairly quickly because the actors and we talked, tried, and eventually agreed on several hilarious ideas.

David thought it was good, but there was too much going on at the same time. He and Patti polished the number to make each moment clear and focused. The first draft was not focused on Autolycus. He was singing the song while the sexual activity was going on around him. David and Patti adjusted the order of events to give Autolycus control of the situation. David went through and named each acting beat so only one thing happened at a time. Patti connected each acting beat to the music by naming counts. Marrying the music to each acting beat was necessary for the comedic timing of the piece.

### “Judgment Day” Battle

#### The Hook:

The battle needed to be as short as possible, yet epic in scope. In *Les Miserables*, the turntable stage surface creates the illusion of movement in time and place. David’s hook was an image of the entire battle revolving as if on a turntable. The turntable provided the illusion of movement in place and time and gave the audience an opportunity to connect to each moment of violence.

### Planning:

David asked Patti and me to look at his ideas for the battle. He does not typically plan the details in choreography as meticulously as Patti. Patti and I helped him find the musical counts for each movement he showed us.

David described events of the battle occurring in two sections. One side of the stage froze, and then the other and they turned toward each other, thus, completing the picture. The whole stage then rotated 180 degrees, ending with a sudden gunshot killing the character Nathaniel and jolting the whole picture into motion. The gunshot needed to be a surprise.

Patti said the music is so even it would be best to begin the battle in the middle of a phrase of music to add to the surprise of the whole thing. We had to start on a different count in each phrase of eight counts. She said, “Keeping the rhythm even – always moving on 4 or 8 - is like saying every word in a sentence with equal value. You must vary it to create a surprise.” We decided the actors should turn toward each other on counts 7 and 8 of the first phrase. The whole picture would rotate beginning count 3 of the second phrase. The final gun shot needed to happen on the weaker beat of the next phrase – count 2&. The final surprise -- the shot -- had to happen just before or just after we expected it to happen musically. The element of surprise is inherent in syncopation.

### Staging:

David staged the battle with the soldiers while Patti and I worked with the African American ensemble in another room. David later told me how the battle evolved. Working “backward to forward,” he began by staging the frozen picture of the final

moment before the gunshot that kills Nathaniel. He then defined each prior moment in frozen tableau that, when seen in sequence – forward to back -- would tell the complete story leading to the final freeze.

David did not know how to transition from the blocking in the scene to the beginning of the battle. When he turned to the actors for ideas, Zach suggested they simply run into their places for the first freeze as the captains nodded at each soldier - thus sending them into battle. Zach's idea worked. David fine-tuned the movement as the actors traveled to their places giving it a sharp, combative and military edge. They moved along straight diagonal lines to get to their places at different intervals. One soldier moved to his place; then two moved at once; then one person; then three ran together to their places. The variation of movement made the pace erratic and unpredictable so the sudden freezes were a surprise.

The shape of the battle was there, but David continued to simplify each moment to clear up the focus and remove any unnecessary steps. Patti finally suggested we make the counts even with the music. It was easier for the actors and the audience to follow. The soldiers executed the battle freezes more successfully because they could feel the timing of the music. The overall violence in each frozen moment was so detailed; the audience needed time to absorb the action to understand the whole story of the battle. The syncopated gun shot was more prominent and shocking against the even musicality of the battle.

David was still unsatisfied with the lack of focus on Nathaniel's death. He asked me to adjust the action to suddenly speed up at the sound of the gun. I added quick

continuing the frozen action for three counts. It worked to focus Nathaniel's death, but something was still missing.

Patti and David realized there was no emotional impact because it was so pretty. It needed to get messy. As a solution, David asked everyone to continue fighting for about five seconds after the battle freezes. The final shot and Nathaniel's death stopped the action. The actors created their own choreography for the continued fight. David told more people to fall injured in the fight. Visually, the action created a sense of chaos and destruction. Essentially, the final freeze ended with a real-time battle among people dodging bullets, reacting to the sounds of the battle, and fighting their opponents to the ground.

David's most significant adjustment was heightening the vocal reactions and sound effects during the battle. He then juxtaposed the cacophony with absolute silence following the final gun shot. The contrasts in rhythm, sound, and action throughout the battle created the needed element of surprise and visceral audience engagement.

The battle at the end of "Judgment Day" allowed both the actors and the audience to complete an emotional journey from the fearful anticipation of battle through the chaos, horror, destruction of battle. The following number, "Tell My Father," became a much more poignant scene because Sam's song of grief for his brother Nathaniel's death further personalized that emotional journey and ultimately provided resolution to the battle.

## “Freedom’s Child”

### The Hook:

“Freedom’s Child” needed a hook to distinguish it from the African American ensembles’ numbers, “Someday” and “River Jordan.” The song “River Jordan” was a journey. “Someday” was a church service. We had no idea what the story was for “Freedom’s Child?” Patti’s initial idea for the hook was to keep the number relatively still and small in contrast to the other two numbers. Basically, it was to be the story of Douglass talking to the slaves about freedom at a secret meeting in the woods. Since the onus was on Douglass, Patti wanted Douglass to sing the beginning by himself until the slaves joined in after the second verse. Douglass needed time to convince them freedom is possible. The secret meeting was the basis for what we hoped to be a simple number.

### Planning:

We assumed the hook was straightforward enough the scene would almost block itself. We did very little to plan the details other than designating a couple of formations Patti wanted to see.

### Staging:

The first rehearsal was a disaster. The scene and the actors certainly did not block themselves. Nothing was happening. Douglass was just standing center stage singing at the slaves seated on the ground. We didn’t know how to get the slaves off the ground since Douglass was not actually asking them to do anything.

Patti and I grew frustrated and skipped forward to see some of the formations she drew. We looked at Marcus standing center stage with two people standing on each



diagonal leading to the vomitoriums. I tried to choreograph swirling crowd movement to reach those positions, but everyone just ran into each other. We finally took a break.

David came in and dismissed the cast early asking Blanton, Jessica, Patti, and I to stay and talk about “Freedom’s Child.”

### The Hook (part 2):

Patti and David realized we did not have a strong enough hook. The first draft lacked urgency because Douglass did not have a strong enough objective in singing the song. We brainstormed about “Freedom’s Child.” Jessica Smith offered some great ideas based on her studies in African-American history. She said the danger of getting caught at a secret meeting between slaves was so great, they would not risk their lives for something trivial. We looked at the words in the song, “Won’t you write them again in letters black and strong?” We toyed with the idea that the purpose of secret meeting was to teach slaves to read. The idea did not allow much movement since reading is such a sedentary activity.

Jessica mentioned abolition pamphlets were sometimes sewn into clothes handed down to the slaves to keep them apprised of the abolition movement. She said, “Maybe one of those pamphlets is a copy of Douglass’s speech.” Based on her suggestion, we decided the slaves were meeting secretly in the woods at night to share information with each other. The danger of conducting such a meeting lent the situation the needed urgency. We finally had our hook.

### Planning (part 2):

The hook became stronger as we fleshed out the details of the story. One slave brings a pamphlet (he found in his clothing) to the meeting. He tries to read it to the

others. Exter, played by Lumumba, brings Douglass to the secret meeting to convince them abolition is possible and they will eventually be free. Not everyone knows who Douglass is. Some people can read and some can't. Some are reluctant to listen to him.

As Douglass grows more fervent in his speech to the slaves, he asks them to read the words on the pamphlet being passed around. The slaves sing the words on the pamphlet. Seeing that his message is reaching the slaves, Douglass begins handing out flyers for people to pass around when they go back to their quarters. They forget themselves in the excitement and sing loudly until Douglass remembers the danger of the moment and quiets them. At the end, Douglass sends them home and they run off stage. Douglass is left standing alone center stage as he watches hopeful and excited slaves carry the message of freedom to their families and friends. The slaves sing the last notes from the vramatoriums as if they are singing from a distance. Planning the details of the hook helped us realize we finally had a story worth staging.

#### Staging (Part 2):

Staging "Freedom's Child" was fairly quick compared to other numbers we had created. David blocked the first few moments setting up the secrecy of the meeting and introduction of the pamphlet. I arranged the actors' body positions to create a more realistic picture and focus. Patti developed the movement based on the emotion of the slaves' building excitement. A solid hook made the staging process fairly simple.

## “Someday”

### The Hook:

“Someday” has the feeling of an African-American gospel choir number. Patti developed a hook based on images from charismatic church services. “Someday” was the slaves’ opportunity to openly praise God, freedom, and hope. It was a moment of reprieve from the pain and suffering in every day of a slave’s life.

### Planning:

Patti created movement vocabulary for the number based on photographic and film images, research, sign language and her own attempts to physicalize the emotion she felt in the number. Though she often names steps in her choreography, Patti gave special attention to naming the vocabulary used in “Someday” according to its intention. Patti showed me the following vocabulary during our first planning meeting for the number:

1. The whole torso tilts in a circle as the head rolls. It is as if the head and heart are overwhelmed and being swept away with the spirit of God. Patti called this “holy rolling.”
2. Praying on their knees with hands clasped in front of them.
3. “Testifying” or throwing their hands in the air as they stand in small groups.
4. Being healed, or fainting from the touch of God.
5. Mopping their brows and waving scarf in response to the preacher or, in our case, Joy. The image is similar to the film *The Apostle*.

6. Hands pushing down from the hip are dubbed “Get that Devil away from me.”

The second part of the phrase, Patty swept her arms up in a counter-clockwise motion twice saying, “Help me, Jesus! Help me!”

7. Frenzied running Patti names the “I’ve-Got-the-Spirit” move.

8. Rocking back and forth. Feeling the spirit

Naming the vocabulary makes it easier to remember since it is rhythmic and it defines the emotional intention of the movement. Once we were on the same page with the vocabulary, we then sat down to diagrams for each movement and possible formation.

#### Staging:

The staging process was much more difficult than we expected because the actors were reluctant to commit to the church gospel hook. The nature of the song required the actors’ full embodiment of the charismatic spirit in the number. The choreography did not work because the actors were afraid to take the risk of complete throwing themselves into the frenzy of the moment. Instead, the choreography was as hollow, unmotivated, and internal.

Finally, we learned they were reluctant to portray what they thought would be a stereotypical image of African-American spiritualism. Some cast members even referred to the choreography as minstrelsy. Patti met with the actors to air any misunderstandings or concerns.

Patti told the actors that both the music and the show demanded an extreme level of commitment from them she had not yet seen. She talked through her creative process and her inspiration for the movement as much more than choreography, but emotion and faith.

The number required full emotional commitment to the text inherent in the choreography, as in the “Get that Devil away from me. Help me Jesus. Help me” phrase. She said the choreography would never work if they did not feel the intention behind each movement. Once the actors felt their concerns were heard and addressed, their resentment dissipated. Before the last run-through of the number, Keith asked the cast to join him in prayer in the hope of finding the necessary spirit of “Someday.” It was a break-through when they finally engaged in the moment and understood the power and hope in the choreography.

“Oh! Be Joyful!”

#### The Hook:

“Oh! Be Joyful!” is another of Autolycus’ scams. The song is similar to “Greenback” as an upbeat musical number featuring the Autolycus and the prostitutes. The hook was the story of three soldiers on sentry duty who are distracted from their posts by Autolycus’ offer of liquor and women. Patti envisioned the number as a drunken square dance leaving the soldiers silly and vulnerable when Autolycus and the prostitutes steal their guns.

#### Planning:

Patti and I talked about steps typical to a square dance. We went through an allemande, dos-a-dos, and polka. Using the square dance vocabulary, we roughly choreographed each section of the number. Rather than meticulously counting everything, we named the verses according to the steps. For instance, we decided the allemande began during the soldiers’ second verse and the dos-a-dos happened on the third verse. The

largest amount of actual choreography would have to be completed during rehearsal because square dancing required more movement than we could write down.

Staging:

After staging the number, we realized that -- just like “Greenback” -- too much was happening at once. Patti thinned the number out to the “Weight Watchers Version.” She needed to rework the number to give Autolycus more control as in “Greenback.”

She worked to tone down Ally and Zach’s exchange by decreasing the amount of beat-driven movement. When I saw what she was doing, I worked with Jeff and Angie to do the same. We simplified everything to give less focus to the events not directly driven by Autolycus. Patti gave Autolycus more control in the scene by focusing the moments he collected money from the soldiers. Patti used moments of stillness or changes in the actors’ visual focus to highlight Autolycus’ lines. We defined the necessary action in each moment in the process of simplifying the number.

David worked to simplify the acting beats that fulfilled the comedic intent of the song. He asked Adam to find a sense of desperation as he began to work harder to sell liquor to the soldiers. Adam quickly turned the desperation to anger. Younger actors often find anger a much easier and generalized emotion to touch upon. In this case, David warned Adam not to move toward anger because the audience will not feel free to laugh.

I helped David musicalize everything by naming each action and corresponding musical count. I asked Adam to throw Zach to the floor on the “Joyful” before “Save my ass.” The timing was right, but the fall still lacked focus. I asked Adam to keep spinning stage left and stop before “Save my ass.” Once Adam followed through with the push, he

was able to take a step to the side and appreciate what he did. The fall finally looked like a deliberate attack rather than an accident. I had begun to hate the fall, but it became clear and focused once we musicalized it.

The actors and I found a moment to pass the flask during the doe-si-doe section. David wanted the guys to appear drunk so he wanted to see them drink one more time. We worked out a way for someone to be able to take the flask from each soldier just as he started to take another drink. I wasn't sure the flask pass worked, but Patti and David never changed the choreography.

When the guys died in the ambush after the number, the cue for the gun shots continued for three seconds. The actors had to fill the cue from beginning to end. I worked with them to define how each soldier was killed. We made the location, impact, and timing of each wound specific to help the actors play the gunshots and slow their deaths to the length of the cue.

### “River Jordan”

#### The Hook:

The song is supposedly written about the slaves' journey to freedom via the Underground Railroad, but the upbeat music is completely contrary to the real struggle and danger of such a journey. It reminds me of the optimism in “Muddy Water” from *Big River*. Patti kept saying, “I just want to cut this number.” David said the song is the only upbeat number in the second act so we had to make it work.

Patti and I talked about the hook for the story of the journey. We asked, “How can we use the space?” and “What was the reality of a journey on the Underground Railroad?” I suggested the journey be about the challenges in terrain slaves had to cross. I explained my source of inspiration to Patti and she said it was worth a try.

During the fall semester I sat in on Jonathan Becker’s neutral mask class. The students’ final projects were to perform the mask’s journey through different terrain. A student put on the neutral mask and began the journey in the middle of an imaginary ocean, then continued the journey on a beach, through a forest, up a mountain, down a mountain, and through a field of tall grass. As the mask encountered each terrain, the actor embodied elements of the terrain itself. I remembered it being one of the most interesting exercises characteristic of the work pioneered by performance artist Jacques Lecoq. Our hook was the journey through each environment along the road to freedom. We used elements of the movement in the neutral mask journey as starting point for structuring the slaves’ journey.

#### Planning:

Patti said we needed to start small. The song began with slaves working in a cotton field. Patti wanted to begin with a maximum of five people onstage. She said, “If everyone is onstage the whole time, we will have to parade a bunch of people around the stage like a chorus line or the merry villagers.” I am not sure exactly what the “merry villagers” looked like, but I know she borrowed the term from Graciela Daniele.

Dustin entered as Benjamin, an Underground Railroad conductor sent to lead Bessie and other slaves to Canada. Listening to the music, Patti said the first section in which the actors sing “Hold On” had a “shush factor.” Patti created a “shush story”: The



slaves got ahead of Benjamin and grew louder in their excitement. Benjamin stopped and “shush-ed” the slaves, reminding them that the journey was not over. The slaves acknowledged they needed to slow down and stay with Benjamin because he was the only one who knew the way to freedom.

The next major event was reuniting Bessie and her husband Toler somewhere in the middle of the number. Patti wanted Toler to enter in shadow from upstage right because it is the strongest position for an entrance. On the second “Hold on,” Benjamin saw the silhouette of a man and quieted the slaves for fear of being discovered. As the light revealed Toler’s identity, Bessie was shocked to see him. She broke through the crowd to embrace him at center stage.

Once we worked out the story based on events that needed to happen during the number, we named the terrain the slaves would encounter. First, they jumped over a river. The first “Hold On” section featured a slave who was scared to jump to the opposite side of the river bank. Benjamin reassured the fearful slave, telling him or her to hold on to hope and strength. At this point, Patti said we needed to add one person to the group.

They then entered the forest going over imaginary logs, under branches, and between trees. Next they ran down an s-shaped road. The terrain of the journey was based on how they traveled from one area of the stage to another. So far they moved in a diagonal from down right to up left and a horizontal line upstage from left to right. Patti said she would like a zigzag from one corner to another. During the second “Hold On,” the actors huddled downstage left when Toler entered upstage right. The “shush story” ended as the slaves celebrated Toler’s and Bessie’s reunion.

Benjamin's intention in the final verse was, "We're almost there." He began a sequence of steps based on the excitement they all feel. The step carries them from up left to down right and curves upstage until they reach center stage where they can see the Canadian border. They all stop a moment and take it in. Then they rush down stage, step over the border, turn upstage and wave to Benjamin in appreciation.

Patti and I think we have something. I sit down and draw it out. We decide who will be added and where. This is very scary because the journey has to be acted and Dustin has to lead it. So far, we haven't seen Dustin act enough to convince us he can carry this number. Without dance steps, the number relies solely on the acting. With dance steps, the number might look like a terrible version of "Follow the Yellow Brick Road" in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Staging:

"River Jordan" was the most difficult number to stage since it required the actors commit fully to acting and mime technique to create the environment of the number. The first staging rehearsal began slowly. After two hours, the number looked like a bunch of actors traipsing all over the place willy-nilly. Patti and I could not tell if the hook was working because the actors were not seeing and creating the terrain defining their movement.

During our first ten-minute break, Patti asked Blanton to play something funky. She made us form a circle where, two by two, we danced into the center of the circle and jammed a bit. I was sick as a dog, but I stepped in the middle and acted like a fool. Finally we were all sweating and acting silly. Patti stopped dancing and said, "Why did I

do this?” One of the actors responded, “To get us to have energy?” Patti said, “I see you giving this much energy and more during breaks, but I don’t see any of that when we are working on this piece. Now you know you *can* do it, so *do* it.” Patti’s reprimand was such a surprise to the actors; they finally woke up and began to work in earnest.

Patti again surprised the actors when she needed them to them to “popcorn” their vocal cut-off before Toler came in. They needed to stop singing at different times to convey astonishment, surprise, or fear at the sight of Toler’s silhouette. Patti stopped and said, “Tell me what you had for dinner. Everyone at once.” Then she “shushed” them. They stop talking at different times. She pointed at them saying, “That is what needs to happen.”

Dustin finally began to lead the group with authority when Patti cut some of the steps with which he was having trouble. She demonstrated his choreography in terms of intention, saying “We’re almost there, we’re almost there!” as she traveled upstage in front of the group.

Polishing the number meant we had to name the exact lyrics corresponding to each movement. The actors and I worked to name every syllable and step. We then talked about their improvisation during the “Hallelujahs” at the end of the number. I asked the actors what images or feelings they associated with freedom and a safe haven. The words they used included: rebirth, waking up, being alive, excitement, power, wind, touching the earth, holding on to something. Together, we came up with images derived from elements, energies, and actions each person could embody. Keith and Joy were being born. They were awakening to the world. Some people were vibrating with the power of freedom.

Some were boiling over with excitement. Anthony was free as the wind. Lumumba was touching and digging in the earth. Jacque was reaching for and gathering freedom. Over time, the improvisations became less literal and served as a basis for physical abandon during a moment of celebration.

### **Chapter III: ESSENCE OF PATTI D'BECK**

The term *essence* is defined by Webster as, “the intrinsic or indispensable properties that serve to characterize or identify something.” Patti uses the term often to define the origination, truth, or inspiration for a moment of choreography. A running joke among the cast of *The Civil War: A Musical* was to begin any description, “it’s essence of \_\_\_\_.” The following pages are my attempt to identify the essence of Patti’s creative process, aesthetics, and working style. My hope in studying Patti as a director, choreographer and person is to provide the reader a greater understanding of the essence of her artistry.

#### **CREATIVE PROCESS**

Patti’s creative process is essentially the same whether she is staging a moment, a scene, a musical number, or an entire play. Her most successful work is a result of her diligence and trust in her creative process. It is only when she skips a step in her own process that she begins to question her creative impulses and becomes anxious about the end product. Working closely with Patti, I have come to define the steps in her creative process:

- 1) Assess the larger theme - Patti asks the questions, “What is it about?” and “What is the essence of the play?” Discovery of the larger theme dictates the needs of the story.
- 2) Evaluate the challenges - Patti identifies the challenges in meeting the demands of the larger theme. Challenges are most often logistical in terms of space or timing. Patti’s greatest challenge in *The Civil War: A Musical* was the fact the script called for creating several different places in time and space from scene to scene.
- 3) Research extensively - Patti finds any image, narrative, story, or historical fact connected to the larger theme.
- 4) Define the hook. – Based on the challenges of the piece and her research, Patti creates a hook.
- 5) Determine dramatic arc - Patti asks “Where are we coming from?” and “Where are we going when the moment is over?” Basically, she defines the first and last moments.
- 6) Define the broad strokes – Patti creates an exact order of events to tell a story fulfilling the dramatic needs of the moment. She fills in the middle of the story with these broad strokes.
- 7) Plan and map each moment - Patti needs to see the events on paper before she goes into rehearsal. If anything, it gives her a structure to use as a point of

departure. She also finds confidence in the structure mapping and planning provides.

- 8) Naming - Patti gives every section and step a name or label. She goes so far as to designate which actor will stand in which space. At this stage in her process, Patti begins to fill in the detail that will make each of her choices specific and clear to the actors.
- 9) Listening to the music – Patti returns to the music during each step of her creative process. The music in a number gives the actors license to move. The music dictates how and when movement happens. Patti develops the hook, arc, and detail of the number using the music as a guide toward further nuance.
- 10) Collaboration in Staging - Patti finally presents her ideas to other members of the production team whose opinion she trusts. She honestly asks for feedback and tries to incorporate others' ideas. In addition, Patti listens to the actor's impulses that arise during rehearsals. She takes time to evaluate each comment and openly states whether or not she is going to apply the comments to the work.

## AESTHETICS

Patti's aesthetic approach is derived from her years of experience as a dancer and choreographer on Broadway. She often second-guesses her affinity for Broadway staging aesthetics. She asks, "Is that too show-biz?" Yet, "show-biz" is part of who she is as an

artist and how she conceives theatre. Her “show-biz” aesthetic is one of her greatest strengths. The hallmarks of her “show-biz” aesthetic approach include:

- Symmetry – Patti naturally creates symmetrical stage pictures that completely balance the playing space.
- Clean lines – Patti’s work is based in exact spacing, order, formations and simple lines. Everything has a sense of polish and definition.
- Presentational staging – Patti knows how to create a chorus number like that of a large Broadway musical number. She choreographs for the audience and to the audience with a constant awareness of the relationship between the stage and audience.
- External manifestation of emotion – The emotion of each moment drives Patti. As a Broadway performer, Patti understands the need to fill each movement with emotion so it can be read beyond the footlights in a large theatre. Her choreography is often a physical manifestation of the character’s emotional state.

## WORKING STYLE

Patti has a positive and caring energy that is contagious. Her nurturing attitude, acceptance of other people, and overall understanding of the human condition create the basis of a working style that is warm, fun and exciting. Patti once told me, “My strength as a dancer and choreographer on Broadway was in my musicality -- and my ability to remember and work with people. When I worked as an assistant to the choreographer, I



usually played good cop to the choreographer's bad cop." Following is a short list of characteristics inherent in the working style Patti has developed over the years:

- Language - Patti has her own vocabulary in life and work based in imagery and humor. The cast even developed a glossary of "Patti-isms" by the end of the run of *The Civil War: A Musical*. Her quirky and clever vocabulary endears her to people, making them work hard to please her. Patti often ties phrases and words to movement. Though these phrases are eventually dubbed "Patti-isms," they actually work as tools Patti uses to make the movement more accessible to actors. The actors remember the movement and connect it to an image or word they repeat over and over until it finally makes sense to them.
- Temperament - Patti has a generally positive and open disposition that makes her accessible to the actors. She has an attitude of discovery in everything, as if she is making discoveries *with* the actors rather than *for* the actors. Actors are not afraid to ask questions or look silly in front of her because she is open to discovering new ground.
- Collaborative spirit - Patti is always asking questions. Working as an assistant to Broadway choreographer like Tommy Tune, Graciela Daniel, and Jeff Calhoun, she learned the art of asking, "What if we \_\_\_\_?" and "Do you think \_\_\_\_?" Her strength as a collaborator is her willingness to let go of her ego and occasionally let someone else assume responsibility for an idea she may have posed. Patti's collaborative spirit is the result of her confidence in her own artistry and creative process.

- Attention to detail – Patti is incredibly detailed in her work. An organized person by nature, she breaks down each movement in detail, and then drills the actors until the minute details are in their bodies. Her attention to detail increases the level of professionalism in the actors’ work, making them hyper-aware of their execution of the movement.
- Presence - When Patti demonstrates a movement sequence for an actor, she has a fire-like energy about her. She is present in the moment. David told me that, after much prodding, she finally told him why Tommy Tune liked to work with her. Tune thought she had something more going on inside – a connection to the movement and the story – than other dancers usually did. She had a presence. When Patti demonstrates a step, one can see that “something” Tommy Tune was talking about. It is her external focus that makes her to be so open and exciting to be around.

Patti’s creative process, aesthetic sensibilities, and working style are only elements of her essence that is ultimately beyond description. At the very core, Patti’s essence -- as a director, choreographer and person -- is her honest spirit of discovery. She is willing to say, “I don’t know, let’s figure it out together.” VCU’s production of *The Civil War: A Musical* was a testament to the synergy in both Patti and David’s modus operandi—honesty and discovery in the moment. The following chapter is a discussion of David’s creative process, aesthetics and working style that served as the perfect compliment to Patti’s work in *The Civil War: A Musical*.

## Chapter IV: DAVID LEONG REVEALED

Over the last three years, I have witnessed David working in several capacities: teacher, mentor, department chairman, fight director, movement coach, producer and director. As his student, I learned valuable lessons about everything from the business of theatre to the artistry of theatre. The following pages are my attempt to filter through the many lessons I have learned *from* David in order to learn more *about* David as an artist and person. Working with him during *The Civil War: A Musical*, I had the rare opportunity to distil the elements of David's creative process, aesthetics, and working style. My hope in studying David as a director, choreographer and person is to reveal to the reader the tenets in his artistry.

### CREATIVE PROCESS

David's creative process appears to be much less a process than an inspiration. A piece of paper with scribbles, swirls, and arrows is usually the only concrete evidence of his creative process. In reality, his creative process is the process of elimination – eliminating and simplifying a moment, scene, musical number or fight -- to find the crucial elements in a story. Whereas Patti's creative process is very structured, the steps in David's creative process are more difficult to define as procedural steps. My

understanding of David's creative process is a culmination of all his work I have witnessed in the time I have known him.

- 1) Research – David is most often inspired by the visual arts. When he choreographed *Napoleon* on London's West End, he searched for images of the Battle of Waterloo. A painting of a running horse developed as the seed for his idea to have the actors hold shields molded in the shape of horse heads as they moved up and down in a gallop-type motion.
- 2) Develop a story –David's drawings come into play once he has read the text several times. A visual person, he usually sketches out the shape of the story based on the sequence of events that need to happen. His drawings may only be recognizable to him, yet they are an integral part of his understanding how best to proceed with staging a scene.
- 3) Creates in the moment – Once David understands the relationship and story inherent in the text, he uses his drawings as an outline to create choreography in the moment. He relies heavily on an actor's impulses, making the staging process appear almost entirely collaborative. In *The Civil War: A Musical*, Patti typically provided the structural parameters that allowed David and Patti the freedom to create as they were staging the numbers.
- 4) Application of principles of direction – David has deeply analyzed the principles of direction during his years of teaching. He often develops ideas

based on principles such as logic, contrast, rhythm, tempo, surprise, and focus. He often asks questions based on those principles like, “What is least expected at this moment?” He develops choreography as a solution to such questions.

- 5) Working details – Whereas Patti’s attention to detail and drilling is part of her working style; David often works the detail in a moment while he is in the process of creating the moment. While staging the song, “Greenback,” he asked the four soldiers to enter several times, each time adjusting their vocal reactions, until he moved on to the rest of the scene. As a visual artist, David often needs to see whether a moment is working or not in order to move on to the next moment, or as inspiration for the next moment.
- 6) Simplifying and Editing – David’s greatest talent is as an editor. Similar to a sculptor chiseling a block of marble to until he finds the exact form of a man, David is able to strip away all extraneous movement to get to the core of the story he is telling.

## AESTHETICS

David’s aesthetic approach is vastly different from Patti’s in his inclination toward life-like images of chaos and confusion. He derives his aesthetic sensibilities from his observance of real-life encounters and years of experience as a fight director. A master of staging domestic fights, he has built a reputation based in the aesthetic principles of contemporary violence – a name he has given a type of violence most often seen in

domestic situations where the combatants are untrained people lashing out in the heat of a moment. David's understanding of that aesthetic runs through everything he choreographs or directs. Over the course of my studies with him, I have developed an affinity for similar aesthetic principles including:

- Asymmetry – David is keenly aware of the use of symmetry or asymmetry, yet he tends to create slightly askew and asymmetrical stage pictures conveying conflict. Conflict is inherent in the imbalance of an asymmetrical shape.
- Chaotic Clusters – Contrary to Patti's clean lines, David tends to stage actors in a very specific order that ultimately appears haphazard—very similar to the way people naturally stand in a crowd at a concert or sporting event.
- Musicality – David is conscious of musicality in everything from vocal reactions to footfalls. Though he does not typically musicalize scene to correspond to counts in the music, he feels when musicalization is necessary to a scene's success. His sense of musicality is evident in his specificity with vocal reactions in a scene.
- Internal manifestation of emotion – The emotion of each moment drives David, which, in turn, drives the actors to invest fully in their work. David works with actors until he is satisfied they honestly feel some type of emotion as themselves or their characters. His choreography often allows space for emotional responses between movements. Most often, his choreography is a physical manifestation of emotion he has helped the actors find during rehearsal.

## WORKING STYLE

David's presence tends to command the attention in a room—especially a room at Theatre VCU where he is department chairman. Chairman or not, he possesses an energy that motivates people to succeed. It is almost as if he is saying, “Let’s see how much you can do. Impress me.” David is approachable because he can be and is open to being impressed.

Several times during the rehearsal period of *The Civil War: A Musical*, David did play “bad cop” to Patti’s “good cop” routine. Together, they raised the level of excellence in creation and performance of a mainstage production at VCU. David’s characteristic working style, detailed below, complimented Patti’s working style to create a balance between two occasional extremes.

- Language – David is typically very straight-forward with actors and encouraging toward actors. Actors often feel they are in a collaborative situation because he often gives them credit for a creative decision saying, “I love that idea! Let’s do that and \_\_\_\_.” Including actors in a creative capacity empowers and lends them confidence in their own abilities. Even though, or perhaps, *because* David uses straight-forward and almost blunt language, actors trust his opinion will be honest if not always desirable.
- Temperament – David reads the energy in a room almost before he enters that room. He tailors his response to create the best possible energy for the situation.

As an example, the cast of *The Civil War: A Musical* entered the Hodges Theatre after a week-long Spring Break to begin the first spacing rehearsal. David knew the rehearsal would be tedious requiring the utmost focus from cast members. He started the rehearsal asking the cast about events during the break, “Who had the funniest moment?”, “Who witnessed the grossest moment?” and “Who had the tenderest moment?” Once the cast was laughing and joking together, he asked Patti to begin a group warm-up. The warm-up ended in a big circle as two people at a time danced into the center. It was hilarious. David was the final person to enter the circle with Jessica Smith. The cast went into hysterics at the sight of David dancing. At the end of the warm-up, David quieted everyone down and told them the day would be long and tedious requiring extreme focus and patience on their parts. As a result, the cast behaved beautifully the whole day. One of David’s greatest assets in his work is his ability to monitor his own reactions to any given situation to produce the most effective working environment.

- Collaborative spirit – Patti once said, “David only works collaboratively. He gets input from so many people, I don’t know how he does it. In my years on Broadway, I have never seen someone who works like he does.” David’s gift to any production he works on is his collaborative spirit. Like Patti, he is not afraid to admit he doesn’t know how to do something and accept help from others to find the answer.



- Demand for excellence – David is relentless in his expectation of excellence from each person involved in a production. David pulled more honest emotion out of actors in *The Civil War: A Musical* than I thought possible simply because he made them repeat a scene over and over until the actors got where he needed them to be emotionally. Not only does he demand excellence from others, he will not accept anything but his personal best work at all times. His process of elimination, simplification and editing continues until he is completely satisfied with the integrity of his work.

An exploration of David's creative process, aesthetic sensibilities, and working style reveal aspects of an artist and man whose complexities are innumerable as his contributions. Over the last three years I have studied with David, I have come to understand every action he makes reveals his love for life, art, and work. He lives and works according to his personal principles of honesty, integrity, perseverance, passion, patience, and trust. In addition, he encourages those around him to define the rules and principles that guide their lives and work. One of the most significant notes David gave me was, "You need to define your creative process and the principles that guide you. Once you have developed a structure for creating work, the work itself – and life – will be easier." The following chapter is the realization of the lessons I have learned and principles I have developed since then from observations of David's, Patti's, and others' work.

## **Chapter V: PRINCIPLES OF DIRECTION AND CHOREOGRAPHY**

*The Civil War: A Musical* was the culmination of every lesson I learned during my graduate career at Virginia Commonwealth University. Every note I took about every principle in direction and choreography was realized in this, my final production at VCU. Though the collaborative spirit of the production was nothing less than divine, a collective understanding of the principles of good theatre was the foundation for each decision made. Following is a simplified list of those principles of direction and choreography applied during each stage of evolution of *The Civil War: A Musical*, from script development to closing night.

- Work backward to forward to find the next logical action. Final moments in a scene or musical number are the result of a logical progression. Working backward from the final moment will uncover the action that logically came before that moment. In acting terms, this technique parallels the examination of given circumstances in a scene. When a moment in a scene is unclear, go back and define the specific circumstances of the previous moment.
- Look for the unexpected. Always ask the question, “What is most expected at this moment?” and “What is the opposite of that expectation?” Occasionally, the unexpected action is too strong a jolt to maintain the logical course of events.

Otherwise, an unexpected action can work to refocus an audience's attention that has waned after a few moments of comfortably fulfilling their expectations.

- Use contrast in rhythm, tempo, tone, mood, movement, tone, sound and mass to create focus in a scene. Contrast can be used to create conflict or increase dramatic tension in a given moment.
- All action does not need to take place on stage. Using off-stage sound and references to points beyond the stage entrances and exits allow the audience to engage their imaginations in creating a place that does not begin and end once actors pass the sight lines of each exit.
- Don't begin and end each scene or number with every available cast member on stage. Allow space for well-timed entrances and exits that contribute to the place and story of the scene. Once all actors are on stage, directorial options are limited to staging everyone in a confined space.
- The tone for a rehearsal is set in the first moment everyone enters the rehearsal space. A fun, yet focused energy is required. The first few minutes of a rehearsal are the most crucial in setting the pace and energy of the entire rehearsal.
- Musicalize a scene so the music and the action are not independent upon one another. Rather, marry the action to specific beats and lyrics in the music. When working with a live orchestra or original orchestration, music may be timed or written to emphasize a specific action, movement, or feeling. Music and action

best serve the story when they are essentially one combined element of the production.

- An actor's well-being is paramount. Ensuring actors' physical and emotional safety may inadvertently be left to stage management, yet the director is ultimately responsible for maintaining a general sense of respect for the actors' confidence and well-being.
- When staging scenes including groups of people in a crowd, asymmetrical spacing is crucial. Look at the way people naturally stand or sit in an informal setting such as a concert, sporting event, party, or even a line at Starbucks. People typically face opposite directions, sit and stand at different levels, and most importantly, they usually position themselves at points of an asymmetrical triangle. Two people standing together often stand just off the other's shoulder, or even turned at an angle perpendicular to the other's shoulder blades or chest. I often ask actor to use the shape of the letters "L" and "T" as gauges when finding a position in an informal group scene. In life, people very rarely approach each other either face to face or in the artificially open position resembling the upside-down "V" we often see onstage.
- Unison movement can be very powerful when used in contrast to individual movement. Know where you need the most impact. If the number is mostly non-linear individual movement; a moment of unison really means something. If the

number is primarily choreographed in unison, individual moments mean more.

Again, we are back to contrast.

- Assume everything can and needs to be cut down to find the simplest and most economical way to tell a story. Even if a spit-take is executed perfectly and is hilarious, it is an extraneous bit if it does not directly or indirectly cause the next event to occur. As a member of the production staff, be wary of individual tendencies to make personal contributions more important than the story of the play.
- The eye can only follow one action at a time. Maintain focus of a scene by making sure only one event happens at a given moment. Auditory perception and not visual perception is conducive to multi-tasking.
- Comedy must be staged with careful attention to detail because it is rhythmic. Vocal sounds and emotional reactions must be crisp and clean to honor that rhythmic sense.
- If too many clever or funny bits of business are happening in a scene at the same time, they each lose their comedic impact because each bit is granted the same value. Choose one funny action or bit and adjust the focus to highlight that bit. Make sure one event happens at a time so each event has its own value in the scene.
- Comedy requires more precision in action and more emotional honesty than any other genre.

- When choosing music to play in a transition between scenes, choose something the audience has already heard earlier in the show. If you use new or unfamiliar music as a transition or introduction to a scene the audience tends to think the next scene or song has already begun.
- Let the *audience* cry, not the actors. When actors begin crying and eventually sobbing, the audience is watching the actor, not the character, indulge in his or her own emotion. Young actors often confuse their own ability to cry on stage with acting. In truth, they become self-indulgent and are no longer sharing a story with the audience. Acting is telling a character's story. Trust the audience will feel the impact of the story and allow them to cry.
- Music is a guide. It dictates the parameters of the situation that must take place on stage.
- Listen to the tone of the actors and the space during rehearsal. When the actors and the energy of the room become silent and heavy, a reluctance to work may settle in. Effective collaboration is in jeopardy at this juncture. Make a joke, take a break, act silly, or dance around. Be aware of and actively direct individual and ensemble energy throughout the progression of a rehearsal.
- Evidence of a character's emotional struggle result from an actor's struggle to produce a vocal or physical action on stage. Asking an actor to reach slightly beyond the limit of what they think they are capable of doing is a strong directorial

technique only if precautions are taken to ensure the actor's safety such as training and physical awareness of the proper execution of an action.

- Audiences must be allowed to laugh. Anger or emotional struggle does not usually prompt laughter unless, as in farce, it is disproportionate to the situation or action. In a comedic scene, a character that is *desperate* to get money is much more effective than a character that is *angry* at himself or someone else for his inability to get the money. Desperation and anger close on an emotional scale. Be wary of a young actor's tendency to slide toward anger as he tries to find a sense of desperation. Specificity in emotion and action is absolutely necessary in honoring an audience's need to laugh.
- Always let actors know what is happening when there is a change or interruption in the rehearsal process. By simply stating, "This is new information..." before stating a change that needs to occur, an actor is better able to listen and follow directions pertaining to the change.
- Actors must be able to answer the question, "What do you (character) want in each scene?" Their answer should be short and to the point. If it is not, and includes a lot of hemming and hawing, do not shy away from putting them on the spot until they are able to articulate their objective in a scene.
- Remind actors of the urgency in a scene by asking, "Are you hearing or saying these words for the first time?"

- Each moment in a play causes the next moment to happen. Every word and action must serve to move the action of the play forward.
- The introduction of a new character to an audience is much like a meeting between two strangers. Both require time to get to know one another, develop interest in what each has to say, and even possibly grow to like each other before either agrees to take a journey together.
- Monologues are a viable part of dramatic structure if they are used for one of two reasons: to explain details needed to understand the events that follow or to lend insight to the psychological and emotional state of a character.
- Recognize when the realization of a creative idea takes much more work than it should. A director or choreographer must know when to let go of an intriguing idea in the interest of telling the story of the moment.
- The energy of the first moment onstage must be dynamically different from that of the audience - in rhythm, tempo, or presence - in order to shift the attention to the stage.
- The first moment in a production directs the audience how to listen to the show by introducing devices and staging conventions such as sound effects, music and lighting, and scenic changes to be used in moving from one scene to the next.

The principles of direction and choreography listed above may serve only as guidelines or points of departure for the development of personal craft and artistry. The



adage, “Rules are made to be broken,” is the basis of creativity. As such, principles in direction and choreography are by no means prescriptive, but subject to constant examination in the evolution of art. The most universal principle in life and art is the necessity to ask questions. Because creativity does not thrive in a vacuum, collaboration is an integral part of the creative process in which questions are fodder for inspiration.

*The Civil War: A Musical* provided the invaluable opportunity to develop my individual sense of artistry in direction and choreography in a uniquely collaborative environment. Collaboration is the foundation of my experience working with Patti and David. My final evaluation is a reflection on collaboration and the profound influence Patti and David have had in the development of my own artistry.

## Chapter VI: COLLABORATION AND ARTISTRY

Theatre is the most collaborative of all the arts. The success of VCU's production of *The Civil War: A Musical* was evidence of true collaboration among directors, choreographers, musicians, actors, technicians, and management. As Assistant Director and Choreographer, I was fortunate to observe and be a part of a truly collaborative process resulting in a rich interlacing of ideas, impulses, and actions. The entire collaborative process from script development to production was so seamless, the experience felt magical -- even *divine*. In reality, the process was born of hard work and collaborative principles exemplified in both David's and Patti's approach to the work and to each person involved in the production.

The purpose of this final chapter is to articulate the two most important lessons I learned through my involvement with VCU's production of *The Civil War: A Musical* -- the nature of true collaboration and of my own artistry. The first section of this chapter is a reflection on collaboration and both the practical and ideological elements fundamental to successful collaboration during the course of this production. The final section of this chapter is a personal reflection on my own artistry; examining the changes and developments in my creative process, aesthetics, and working style influenced by the experience of working with Patti and David.

## REFLECTIONS ON COLLABORATION

A well-known Broadway and television fight director once told me, “There is no such thing as true collaboration. Just do your part.” The sad truth is most people involved in theatre have never experienced a truly collaborative creative process. It is especially rare in Broadway productions where millions of dollars, reputations, and egos are at stake. Even so, both David and Patti built successful careers from Broadway to academia on the foundation of collaborative principles. The scope of their careers, the productions they both have helped create, and their approach to *The Civil War: A Musical* are all testament to the existence of collaboration.

In my experience as an actor, student, and choreographer, I have witnessed and been part of more counter-productive attempts at collaboration than productive ones. In almost every case, the greatest deterrents to collaboration were assertions of ego and creative ownership. The goal of collaboration – innovative creation through collective problem-solving – supersedes the concepts of individual ego and creative ownership. Through true collaboration, several people working together can achieve a more creative and dynamic vision for a production than might have been found by one person working alone.

Collaboration thrives when the focus is the integrity of the production rather than personal recognition. David’s greatest strength as a collaborator is his dedication to the excellence of a production. His constant search for the extraordinary solution to each problem inspires others to do the same. Abandoning his own ego, he often solicits input from colleagues and students until the solution is found. He does not often reward or

acknowledge individual creative contributions, but instead devotes his energies to the practical application of the solution itself. From a contributor's point of view, his lack of acknowledgement of the person who created the idea can be frustrating. Yet, the fact that he values the work more than his own and other's egos or sense of creative ownership makes him such a strong collaborator.

Patti's greatest strength as a collaborator is her dedication to and respect for the talents everyone brings to the production. Whereas David collaborates with deference to the production, Patti collaborates in deference to individual knowledge and expertise. She recognizes and employs individual strengths that complement her own strengths and weaknesses. She often begins collaborative interaction saying, "You are better at this than I am, so what do you think about...?" Her self-effacing solicitations for creative input are not only endearing, but also signal her faith and respect for fellow contributors. Patti engenders individual confidence in the validity of each idea posed in collaboration. Though the primary focus of both Patti's and David's collaborative efforts is the same -- the excellence and integrity of the production -- their differences in approach perfectly complement one another.

Though individual approaches to collaboration may vary, significant progress in collaboration is based on each person's willingness to actively engage in the exploration of ideas. Engagement in productive dialogue -- both physical and verbal -- is the foundation of collaboration. Collaborative dialogue is an improvisation of ideas and action. A tenant of improvisational acting is answering each question or action offered with, "Yes, and..." Similar to improvisational acting, collaborative dialogue begins when one person offers an

idea or asks a question. In doing so, that person essentially admits a need for help in working through an idea and thus stimulates collaborative dialogue. The structure of collaborative dialogue, then, is the initial question posed, “What if we...;” and the answer, “*Yes*, that is a great idea *and* what if we...”

The final moment of *The Civil War: A Musical* was the result of collaborative dialogue between David and me. The following is an account of our conversation:

Cara: Do we have to do the final battle scene?

David: No, why?

Cara: What if we skip the battle scene and move directly to Douglass’ speech at the end? The rest of the cast can enter the stage saying the name of each battle and number of casualties as a sort of underscoring to Douglass’ speech.

David: Yes, I like it. [And] what if we do that in place of the battle *and then* have Douglass enter to deliver his final speech?”

The “What if... / Yes, and...” structure of our conversation led to a surprising and truly extraordinary solution to the problem of the final battle. Collaborative dialogue allowed new ideas to surface that may not otherwise have been conceived by one person working alone.

Inherent in the collaborative journey is not only the verbal dialogue, but also the shared core values that inform such dialogue. The following is a list of those core values fundamental to the collaborative process in *The Civil War: A Musical*:

- Faith – Faith is most often related to spiritual or religious matters as the belief in something intangible or illusive. The intangible nature of collaboration requires faith in each person's talents and abilities to contribute productively, as well as faith in the integrity of the final product.
- Courage – Courage is necessary to delve into the unknown territory of ideas. Trite, safe, and uninteresting productions are the result of a lack of courage in exploring unconventional ideas. Courage is required to depart from the norm and join with others to uncover potential in each new suggestion.
- Patience – Patience is essential in maintaining participation in the collaborative process. Collaboration tends to be a messy, non-linear, and even circular process that usually comes together very quickly toward the end. Patience is required to ride out the twists and turns in the collaborative and creative process.
- Tenacity – Tenacity is critical in discovering the extraordinary solution to each creative problem. The tendency to settle for easy answers or quick fixes that are only “good enough” is counter-productive to collaboration. The collaborative process requires tenacity in continuously asking questions to find the best possible answer.
- Humor – Humor is crucial to weathering the frustrations inherent in the collaborative process. When an idea does not work – or fails miserably – a sense of humor allows the group to find perspective and move forward. Humor ultimately sustains the momentum of the collaborative process.

- Respect – Respect is the foundation of collaborative interaction. Productive conversation between supposed collaborators is impossible if they do not respect one another. An atmosphere of respect fosters collaboration; allowing each person to participate creatively – offering and responding to ideas – without fear of personal and professional judgment.

Through my reflections on collaboration and the principles underlying the collaborative process involved in this production, I have begun to understand collaboration as a methodology for art and pedagogy. The goal of further reflections upon the nature of my personal artistry is to develop an understanding of my own tendencies and potential contributions in artistic and pedagogical collaboration.

#### REFLECTIONS ON PERSONAL ARTISTRY

The result of my studies in the VCU Master of Fine Arts program and the completion of my journey with *The Civil War: A Musical* is the understanding of my own artistry as personal craft. VCU Voice and Movement Professor Dr. Aaron Anderson once stated that we become artists when we no longer need to emulate our mentors, but are able to synthesize the lessons they taught into the practice of our own artistic and pedagogical crafts. David's ultimate gift to me as a teacher, mentor, and friend is his challenge to constantly examine my own approaches to work and life. As stated earlier in this text, David first presented his challenge in response to my choreography stating, "You need to define your creative process and the principles that guide you. Once you have developed a structure for creating work, the work itself – and life – will be easier." The following self-

analysis is my attempt to address that challenge in the analysis of my developing artistry and craft.

## CREATIVE PROCESS

- 1) Critical assessment of the play – In the past, I assumed simply reading the play was enough to begin working on the choreography. Choreography and direction are needed to bring the text of a play to life—to tell the story in the text. Understanding this, I now read a play more critically with attention to who says what about whom, the action in a scene, and the overall sequence of events. As I read, I write notes of images and ideas that arise. Once I have read the play several times, I begin to research the images and ideas in my notes.
- 2) Research – Similar to Patti and David, I collect images from photography, visual art, and video to inspire ideas. Patti’s research process is much more thorough than mine; providing information useful not only to her, but also to actors and staff. I hope to incorporate her thorough investigation of every available resource - including print and personal experience - in my future process.
- 3) Develop a story – Before I understood the importance of the story, I tended to create images based solely on the emotions or philosophical issues the play evoked. I often got bogged down in the technical elements of those images and the choreography I created. I now realize my job as a director and choreographer is to tell the story of the play and work to develop an overall story for the piece I am creating. Based on research, I develop a clear definite



sequence of events and activities that must play out in the course of the story. I then begin to brainstorm to find a hook that will help me tell that story.

- 4) Define the hook – Before working with Patti, I did not understand the need or application of the hook in my work. I often created an interesting move or idea to be used in one of two ways-- as a clever choreographic element or as a gimmick. I never thought to find a hook or an idea to support the style and story of the overall piece. Thanks to Patti's use of a hook, I now view a hook as the cornerstone supporting the structure of any piece I choreograph.
- 5) Workshop time –David once suggested I schedule time to workshop my ideas with actors. As a developing choreographer, I need time with actors to work out the mechanics of my hooks and choreographic ideas. My tendency is to develop grandiose or complex ideas that may work in my mind or even on paper, but not in actual practice. Workshop time gives me an opportunity to simplify and develop my initial impulses for movement.
- 6) Planning and mapping – My greatest downfall in past projects has been my reluctance to plan and map out on paper the structure of a choreographic piece. My lack of preparation often resulted in a lack of logic in the work. I am not yet practiced or organized enough to create in the moment as does David. Based on Patti's example, I learned the most invaluable lesson in creativity: planning and mapping out ideas on paper are indispensable steps in my creative process.

- 7) Collaboration in Staging – Like Patti and David, I have always approached staging as a collaborative task. My struggle has always been when and how to maintain creative control of a situation involving input from actors. I have learned to work through that struggle by following David's and Patti's examples. When working with an actor who offers an unusable idea, Patti and David essentially maintain collaborative dialogue saying, "I think that is a great idea, and it could work. Remember that idea and we might come back to it. What I would like to try now is ..." I have adopted this method in my own staging process because it facilitates my assertion of creative control and my collaborative relationship with actors. The most important factor in collaborative staging is acknowledging the value of each contribution as I continually guide the discussion toward a solution.
- 8) Simplifying and Editing – The initial shape of a piece I choreograph tends to be a bit nebulous because my first instinct is to complicate the story with excess movement. Though I may never be as meticulous an editor as David, he has taught me to look for only what is pertinent to each moment and to cut the rest. I have learned the valuable lesson that nothing is sacred but the story being told. Through the process of simplifying and editing, it is possible to identify the core actions necessary to clearly tell a story and to recognize all else as filler that needs to be cut.

## AESTHETICS

My strength as a choreographer and director is my aesthetic approach. The basis of that approach is abstraction in imagery derived mainly from years of training as ballet, modern, and jazz dancer. In the world of dance, the story is not told through words, but through emotion, imagery, and composition in movement. I find it easier to translate words into movement and images than into playable action within a scene. My greatest strength then as a choreographer -- the ability to abstract movement from the concrete words of a script -- is possibly my greatest weakness as a director.

Studying with David over the last year, I have begun to recognize some of his aesthetic sensibilities in my own work. I suppose I have incorporated many of his lessons into my own understanding of theatre. My aesthetics are an amalgamation of influences from my mentors, theatre training, observations of human behavior, and personal experiences. Following are the main characteristics of my aesthetic approach:

- Asymmetry – Asymmetry is an imbalance in shape reflective of conflict. As drama is driven by conflict, I use asymmetrical stage pictures to convey conflict and drive the drama or story forward. Further, most shapes that naturally result from human behavior - our relationship to space and other people - are usually asymmetrical.
- Non-linear movement – Circular or indirect movement conveys chaos and conflict in the inability to follow a linear path. In staging, I often ask actors to find the most indirect path to get somewhere. That path is usually the most dramatically interesting choice because it is based on conflict.

- Rhythm and tempo – Rhythm and tempo are directly linked to time, intention, and sense of urgency. I am constantly aware of my use of rhythm and tempo in movement and sound to tell the story of each character and moment.
- Physical manifestation of emotion- Emotion is directly tied to physical action. There is very little intellectual reason in emotional response. For this reason, I work to find the physical manifestation of a character's emotional state. Emotional truth is the goal of my choreographic choices.

## WORKING STYLE

- Language – My use of language in choreography and directing is my primary developmental hurdle. Growing up as a dancer, I have always relied on physical demonstration rather than words. Now, as a choreographer, director, and teacher I must also clearly explain movement and ideas verbally. An idea can only be fully explored and realized if it is fully articulated. Patti helped me improve upon this particular weakness by encouraging me to, “Say it again another way.” The solution is to slow down, work through an idea or comment before I speak, and explain the heart of my idea or comment with confidence.
- Temperament – My temperament is one of my assets in building relationships and working as a choreographer, director, and teacher. Actors and students find my open, friendly, and positive attitude and sense of humor approachable. I assume that every discovery is due to my and the actors' combined efforts. The fact I am physically very animated and a natural clown lightens the tone in a rehearsal or classroom and facilitates physical risk-taking and a sense of play and fun elemental

to theatre. Even so, I am aware my natural disposition lacks the gravitas needed to manage rehearsals or a classroom over an extended period of time. Assuming my own energy and focus set the tone in a rehearsal or class, I tend amplify my physical energy to make up for any lack of energy in the room. My efforts often prove ineffectual as I bounce around the room to the point of exhaustion while everyone else watches with amusement. In reality, I am not solely responsible for carrying the energy of a room. The key is to recognize when I begin to assume that responsibility and use my excess physical energy to find a more grounded stance, amplify my and others' focus on the work, and develop the gravitas I otherwise lack.

- Collaborative spirit – I am fascinated by the potential for creativity through collaboration. My own creativity thrives in a collaborative environment where I am free to offer even the most abstract ideas. I often voice a fairly unformed idea that has real potential in the hope someone will help me further develop and fully realize that idea. I am typically more comfortable working as a contributor rather than one who guides the collaborative process. Through the lessons learned in my coursework and this production, I have grown more assertive and confident in my capacity to make creative decisions while maintaining a spirit of collaboration.

Even as I commit my thoughts on collaboration and artistry to paper, I realize the very nature of doing so is counter to the fluidity of the topics discussed. The definitions and application of collaboration and my own artistry are in constant flux. As soon as I define the ideals of collaboration, relationships and group dynamics change to slightly alter

the collaborative model. As soon as I define my own artistry, another facet of my work or personality surfaces to expand and modify my initial definition. My reflections on collaboration and artistry are thus snapshots of an active and ongoing process as ephemeral as the art of theatre itself.

This written work, *The Civil War: A Collaboration in Direction and Choreography* is itself the product of a truly collaborative process involving not only Patti D'Beck and David Leong, but also various professors, friends, readers, and editors who contributed along the way to its completion. I have gained more personally and professionally from this entire process than I ever thought possible. As Associate Director and Chorographer for VCU's production of *The Civil War: A Musical*, I was provided the invaluable opportunity to work with and critically explore the artistry of both Patti and David - two very different though equally remarkable artists. Their mentorship has deeply influenced my approach to life and theatre. Though I will always carry their teachings with me, I recognize the completion of this thesis as the start of a new phase of personal, artistic, and pedagogical development. Armed with knowledge gained from my teachers, I now must continue to challenge that knowledge as I become *my own* teacher. The end of my career in the VCU Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy program marks the beginning of the next phase of my ongoing journey as an artist, student, and teacher.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**REHEARSAL JOURNAL ENTRIES**

**MILITARY EDUCATION**

On January 15, 2005, most of the cast members and David Leong, Jessica Smith, Emily Watson and I took a field trip to Pamplin Historical Park & The National Museum of the Civil War Soldier near Petersburg, Virginia. The focus of the Pamplin exhibit is the story of the common soldier during the Civil War rather than that of the officers featured in most museums. We wanted to provide the actors with first-hand information about life during the Civil War and inspire morale among our own ranks. Earlier that week, I spent two days studying with Dan Beasley, a Historical Guide from Pamplin on the proper military protocol for handling a rifle, bayonet, sword, and marching according to the manuals used in the Civil War. David arranged my training with Dan so that I could provide basic military movement vocabulary to him and Patti as the show developed.

After our visit to Pamplin, David thought it would be helpful to bring Dan in to work with the actors. On January 25, 2005 the actors and I spent a week of rehearsal learning and perfecting drills with Dan. That week served as a foundation for all the work we did over the next three months, as detailed in the following pages.



January 29, 2005

Weaponry Workshop. They have spent all week drilling so I spent an hour with them to try to work out some formations we could use in “How Many Devils?” It was not entirely successful. It is hard to move that many people around and collectively find a shape. I asked for their help a great deal. We tried everyone’s ideas. I was trying to get them to march by file, etc. I know that there is a way they do this with huge armies, but we can’t figure it out. Finally we found a way to do a hairpin turn. It moves down in a straight line, then turns and cuts a tight diagonal up right. Not ideal, but it was something. We all treated it as playtime. We used the rest of the time to talk about freezes and tableaux. I put them into groups of 2, 3, and 4 people and told them that they were to create a snapshot in the middle of the battle. They worked on the freezes then we looked at them. We looked for a clear story and active freezes. I explained the principles of freezes.

- 1) They must be uncomfortable.
- 2) Body parts must be juxtaposed. If head turns one way, shoulders turn another, etc.
- 3) The guns are part of the asymmetry. No one can have a gun on the same horizontal or vertical plane.
- 4) Triangles are more interesting than straight lines.

They loved this work. Once they thought they understood it, they asked if they could do more. We did one big battle picture composed of all the different groups. They were so great. They asked if I had a camera. This work will be really helpful later when

we are doing freezes. They started to develop an outside eye so they could create their own. With this knowledge, we shouldn't have to give them every bit of choreography. This is an ideal situation-- playing with shapes, vocabulary, and concepts before we even go into choreography. Hopefully we will save some time when we start working the numbers.

January 31, 2005

David asked me to do two entrances and exits.

We worked one entrance:

- One army enters down left ragtag style. They are tired. Some lie down, some chat with each other. Then Brian, the captain, comes in and talks to one of the men. We hear a "boom" offstage down right. The captain has a lieutenant send two soldiers off to see what happened. They run and exit down right. One soldier returns and tells Brian that something is going on and they need reinforcements. Brian calls everyone to attention and marches them out to the battlefield. Graham has a goofy movement quality so I made him the jokester of the group who almost runs into the Captain and can't find his place in line when called to attention.
- The next group entered in two columns led by Cory. Cory sees something out on the field (down right vom) and calls "Halt". He takes out field glasses, and then sends Taylor out to check on the situation. Taylor runs out down right as Cory calls the men into the position "guard." Taylor runs back onstage gets back into line. I ask Cory and

Taylor to take one turn around each other before he heads back to the line. They keep “forgetting” to do it. I acknowledge that it is arbitrary and does not make logical sense, but that it is needed for choreographic shape. Jo, the stage manager sees it when they finally do the turn and she nods that it was needed as well. Then Cory walks behind the line and calls, “Charge!” They run out in a wedge formation, with Cory running behind. The guys keep laughing because I made Cory look like a coward by having him follow the charge. I ask Dan what he thinks. He says that, even though it is what they would have really done, it does look pretty bad. History meets theatricality. The captains would always stay in the rear so they could see and direct the battle. For our purposes, I moved Cory to the front and asked him to be the first to charge. It was better.

After David looked at the two scenes, he left and we worked a skirmish sequence. Dan wasn't sure exactly what a skirmish looked like, but he made it up based on what he thought it would be. It is basically a kind of leapfrog formation where one person goes down to the ground while the other moves past him and fires. The person who fired kneels down to reload while the other moves forward to fire and so on. It is really dynamic. Maybe we can use this for “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie.” Once we have drilled the skirmish, I have them skirmish in retreat. When the two armies (one downstage and one upstage) pass each other in the middle, I call freeze. They all turn into each other and create a battle tableau. I loved it. Dan and I thought it looked good. Hopefully we can use

it somewhere. This was fun. I think they are pretty jazzed about the possibilities of using all this in the show.

## “A HOUSE DIVIDED”

February 4, 2005

It was my first meeting with Patti to talk through the show and numbers. The soldiers came in at 7:30. We ran through all the military training they had learned up to that point so that Patti could see all the vocabulary we had to work with including the Manual of Arms, marching, wheeling, and formation of battle lines moving into single file lines. We showed her the two scenes I had choreographed for David, and the skirmish. Next they grabbed swords and went through the four saber commands. Then we drilled cuts and parries and footwork. It all only took an hour. It took so much longer than that to learn everything. They even learned to mime the nine-step load sequence with the rubber guns. When David later told them that there would be no mime work they all looked at me incredulously. I got carried away and taught them the sequence because I liked it.

Patti excused the guys and we continued to work. We worked on “A House Divided,” the first number – starting with Lincoln’s speech. Patti says we are doing the broad strokes first. Patti asks, “What exactly is it? What is the story?” “A House Divided” is about the excitement of going to war. The journey is that from a citizen hearing about the war and wanting to join, saying goodbye and ultimately joining the army. David described the movement as “whoosh” then freeze. So what are those freezes? We

brainstorm on stories. We talk through all the possible activities like recruitment, memory tokens, packing, getting dressed, etc.

- What if one section is all about saying goodbye and giving someone a memento?
- One couple can be getting married before he leaves for the war. Do we start with everyone onstage or can we bring some people in?
- We can bring people in here and there.

She goes back to the music over and over. We listen to the music and Patti names the sections in terms of, “This moves slowly. Intimate. This picks up and is a whirlwind of activity.” We set the story and then go back to the music and see where the music moves. We need “license musically” to move or do something. She comes up with the idea, and the music defines the parameters of the idea. In order to continue working with the ideas of move people in and out of tableaux, Patti says we need a “little tingle or trill that gives it a lift so I have permission to move.” Again, she goes back to the music. The music does not signify movement so we have to delay it a bit.

Patti maps out the first picture. She is so detailed that she even wants to put names in. Patti thinks that the lighting will help us focus on the person singing. I’ve never seen lighting work well in Hodges. After hearing our ideas, David says that the whole picture needs to change and revolve. We already planned for that. Patti says we need to find out what recruitment looks like. Can we have any tables and chairs or props like knitting and pictures?

For Lincoln's speech at the top, we don't have a curtain so we can't just to the lights down and magically appear. I explain that we can see everything, even in the dark, in that theatre. So maybe they can "filter in and pepper themselves" as Lincoln talks.

We did a lot of planning. I was nervous at first because I had no idea what she wanted from me, but she treated me as a colleague and we threw around ideas. When she doesn't understand what I'm saying, she says, "Say it again another way." I'm not sure if that is because my ideas are bad or I am incoherent, but I try not to take it personally and really say it again more clearly. Patti doesn't judge any ideas. She says, "Okay" and tries to make it work. When it won't work she says, "I'm not sure that gives us the correct license to \_\_\_\_." Then she states a reason it will not work. It feels good because I know she at least considered my input in a real way and processed it. We finish up early because she says we are both tired. She is such a caring person. I'm excited about the work.

Today we heard the African-American ensemble are being disrespectful of each other during vocal rehearsals with Blanton. It seems there is a riff between the theatre and music majors. The theatre majors feel they can perform better than the music majors who have solos. Evidently, they are being disruptive and making faces while the soloists are singing.

David and Patty went into their rehearsal tonight. Patti told them she did not understand their behavior and was hurt by the way they were treating each other. Then David said, "Patti just talked to you from her heart. I am now talking to you as the Chair of the Department. If I see or hear that you are even *looking* at someone with any expression other than full support, you are out of the show. Not only are you out of the

show, but you might as well change your major because you will never work at Theatre VCU again. You will never be on the main stage again if this continues.”

Later, Blanton said that he was rattled by their speech. He was left with the task of getting them to sing. All their songs are “Hallelujah” songs. They certainly did not feel like jumping up and down after that.

It is hard to set the tone for rehearsal. A fun, yet focused energy is required. The first few minutes are the most crucial in setting the pace and tone for the evening. Stage management noted that the ensemble had a meeting outside during the first break. Evidently, they all admitted to each other they deserved the reprimand. They apologized to each other. I understand the room was much more comfortable and focused after the break.

We also heard that Carey’s understudy was being hateful to her. Carey started crying during Musical Theatre class. David and Patti are going to talk to the rest of the company tomorrow. This all makes me crazy. My gut reaction is, “Do your job and get over it!” The fact that this is academic theatre means we have to resolve issues like this. We don’t have the luxury of firing people and hiring someone else.

February 5, 2005

Patti and I met at 10:00 a.m. and worked on “A House Divided.” Patti needs to map everything out to know where each person is and where he or she is going. She is incredibly organized. We drew each moment on copies of the floor plans. We defined person’s story. Then we went through the music and wrote down where the freezes needed to happen musically, where they begin to move slowly (not in David’s “slow motion”), and

where they move in real time. We talked about exits based on where we thought they would enter for “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie.” This is going to be good! Maybe this mapping thing works.

February 8, 2005

We began staging “A House Divided.” We created the first picture after the entrance for Lincoln’s speech, then the Sam/Nathaniel picture, then the Bill/Sarah picture. That’s all we had time for. Then we moved the soldiers around for 10 minutes to see pictures. The freezes worked quite well. David offered some ideas. The only problem with working like this is that it takes forever. Patti and David keep adjusting it because they will not settle for mediocrity, even at this stage. We work until it is right. I hope the show gets finished in time.

March 8, 2005

David and I stayed in B72 to work on “A House Divided.” First, we need to clean up the movement into and out of the freezes. David defines them as “clicks.” They are so important because they allow the audience to follow along. The surges in and out of freezes give the audience a moment to understand that something different is happening. When VCU did *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, there were no clicks in the freezes so I didn’t realize that everyone had frozen, or that the focus had changed, until a couple of lines after the freezes took place. I also missed the first few lines after they started moving again because there was no definite beginning. We can look at freezes as punctuation. The meaning of a sentence is difficult, if not impossible to understand without punctuation. We must understand that one thought has ended and another has begun. The clicks are not



just a theatrical convention; they are necessary structural elements allowing the audience to read the action of the play.

David begins “A House Divided” by having everyone walk around. He calls “freeze” and “go.” People have to click in and out quickly. They are all moving at a quick tempo because they are almost running between the freezes in “A House Divided.” They have to stop on a dime. He then says, “Talk to someone. Now freeze.” They learn to make the freezes more active and animate their faces.

We worked on the details of “A House Divided” freezes. I walked around and made sure everyone’s faces were involved and I could see each story clearly. We made the freezes even more active and emotionally involved. David worked with the soloists in the number while I walked around adjusting the freezes. He worked with Jason and Chase to get Jason more emotionally involved. It was amazing. David simply made him do it over and over until he got where he needed to be emotionally. David said, “Jason, you are being nice! Stop being nice.” David didn’t let him get away with anything less than complete commitment.

I worked the final section where the armies face-off with each other. We drilled it over and over. We stopped every time they got it wrong and went back. It all demanded intense focus and attention to detail on the actors’ parts. Defining and re-defining everything is necessary. Holding them responsible for the minutiae and precision in each moment made them work to get it right. We always talk about the fact our students don’t understand the need for drilling choreography. Today, I think they are beginning to get it.

March 21, 2005

Tonight everyone was tired and the focus was scattered. Patti started by warming them up with stretches to help focus their energy. Patti and David worked “A House Divided” in B72 while I went into B57 to work another number. They changed the ending. David and Patti tell me when they change things that I set. It is really sweet, but I don’t mind at all when they change my choreography. I hope I don’t give the impression that I disagree with the changes or that my feelings are hurt.

March 26, 2005

During first tech, we only got through “Home is the constant,” in four hours time. I am not doing much. Every time they stand still David says, “Cara. Work.” I get up and scramble around to adjust spacing. In “A House Divided,” some of the guys can not get to their places in the allotted time so I changed some of their entrances. I hope it works because we didn’t get to go back and run it. The cast is really focused and behaving very well.

“BY THE SWORD/ SONS OF DIXIE”

February 12, 2005

This is about the excitement of going to war. The characters have to evolve from untrained boys to precisely trained soldiers. How can we use the stage for this? Patti says we have to figure out how we can treat the space since there are two armies onstage at all times. We sit down and draw diagrams. We have circles, boxes, and triangles. We had to take a minute at the end of rehearsal on February 10 to see different placements of the soldiers.

1. Union clumps downstage while confederate is upstage in rows.
2. Confederate clumps downstage while union is lined up in row doing sword drills.
3. Confederate on one side of the stage, Union on the other. Conf comes downstage to sing. Union moves straight downstage to sing as Conf. moves straight upstage.
4. Union soldiers on the outside of the circle all facing the same way. Now face the audience from the same positions. Cory can walk around the circle one way if the circle is moving the other. Confederate soldiers are in the center.
5. Union comes downstage in a flying wedge formation as the Confederates move to the sides and upstage. Union splits the Confederate.
6. Union as the outline of a box.
7. Clump on separate diagonals.

We feel better knowing we have options. Patti asks me if I want to write down any sword choreography. I say, “No, I think I’ll keep it simple.” Once we are in rehearsal, I wish I had worked it all out beforehand according to counts. I thought I would just say, “Parry 1, Parry 2, Cut 5, Thrust Lunge,” and it would all take care of itself. Instead I spent ages working out the choreography in front of the guys with Blanton playing the music. I felt so unprepared. I need to learn from Patti’s fondness for planning. All she could do was watch and say if she liked it or not because she doesn’t swordfight. It was tedious. I couldn’t even get the opening swirl entrance to happen as I had envisioned.

The sword points are sharp! I learned to check all props for safety at the Celebration Barn. In this case, I put tape on the ends of the swords until we file them down.

Patti realized I know how to place people in a messy sort of order. She heard me say “Make an L or T in relation to each others shoulders, guys!” She started laughing and said, “I got it! I got the secret!” She said that, in thirty years, she has never seen anyone who knows how to create messy stage pictures like David does. I’ve learned it from him. Ls and Ts and triangles are my gauges for body positioning. Now she says, “Cara will you do that thing you do?”

David’s Notes:

- Union: First clump needs to be further upstage.
- Confederate: Need to split in the middle and sweep to the sides and upstage as Union comes down the middle.
- Union: Second clump looks too much like first one.
- Chase and Tommy need to come in on “half a mile away.”
- In general, there needs to be more swordplay.
- None of the guys will have scabbards! That changes everything. (I WISH I HAD KNOWN THAT! Maybe I should have asked.)
- At the end when they walk in boxes, it will work if we double-time it.
- “Make the ladies swoon.” Tommy, Chase, Graham, and Rob are in a line. Chase needs to say that to Graham and Rob too.
- Rifles need to be handed out slower.
- Rifles should always be moving in wedge formation.

While we were showing David, I sat down and diagramed the number to fix some of the traffic problems. I knew how to fix some things before David gave us his notes. He

likes the shape of it. We are on the right track. I am not sure what he means when he says I need to include more swordplay. There is only so much you can do with a saber, especially in such a tight space. We could moulinet during the whole number, but it gets boring. He didn't like the choreography I created from strike positions done in contagion in the confederate wedge. He said they need to do Manual of Arms drills, which just seems like arbitrary movement to me, but I'll do it. He doesn't want their feet to move. So basically they will look like a flag corps? Eventually, he explains his choreographic reasoning saying, "It speaks to the precision they have gained through drilling." He knows some of his notes confuse me, so he says he will work on it with me. He and Patti are not happy with the end yet. The soldiers are marching in box formations during the last chorus. Maybe the boxes need to move double time? Something more explosive needs to happen at the end.

I talked to Patti about unison movement. It can be very powerful when used in contrast to scattered movement. You must know where you want the impact. If the number is mostly non-linear individual movement; a moment of unison really means something. If the number is primarily choreographed in unison, individual moments mean more. Again, we are back to contrast.

March 6, 2005

Patti called and said I needed to look at the end of "By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie" on the bootleg Broadway tape. She and David liked that ending better. I looked at it and notated it. I didn't think to notate the counts of the choreography in the video. I just wrote

down the moves so I had to work the timing out with the guys when I only had an hour to teach it to them. Another lesson learned.

Notation from the video (lyrics and corresponding movement):

“When the Blue Meet the Gray”

- Union faces upstage, Confederate faces downstage. They are back to back. Groups are staggered.

“Pay”

- Conf – Bring guns across to inspection stance
- Union – From position with points down on the ground, Moulinet inside, Parry 3, Parry 2

“When Sons/By Sword”

- Union – P1, diagonal slash low left to high right
- Conf – Shift left, right, front. Push gun front.

“Take to the Field”

- All turn to the right

“Battle”

- Union – swords up in salute
- Conf – Push guns up

“Won”

- All turn to right stop on “Yield”

“By the Sword” (final chorus)

- Union in front facing downstage.

“Scared Yankee Runs”

- Conf – turn to the right to face downstage. Guns at order arms, legs in second position.
- Looks like: Union Confederate (side by side)

“We will live or we’ll die”

- Confederate move to face stage right
- Union turn to face stage left
- They are back-to-back, heads turned downstage.
- Union cut to 5 on DIE.
- Confederate aim guns on DIE.

“By the Sword”

- Both step out facing downstage. Deep plie. Raise sword and gun w/ right hand slowly on “sword.”

Final Beats

- All turn to face left.
- Conf – Hold guns in front, stock on floor between feet.
- Union – Moulinet into P2. Left hand on hip. Point on floor.

March 26, 2005

During the first tech, Eric fell in “By the Sword/ Sons of Dixie.” He fell as they were running in during the entrance. The masonite has been painted with grit, then paint, then a sealant that decreased the slickness of the stage. I told the guys they may need to run a smaller circle. The momentum in running downstage makes the turn upstage too

hard to achieve. We pulled the circle farther upstage. Eric will be pretty bruised. I think it scared him more than anything.

## “THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION”

February 5, 2005

We went on to “The Peculiar Institution.” Patti starts by telling where we are emotionally. She talks through the story and journey they have to take from beginning to end. Patti says that this is an internal moment where the slaves get to voice their stories.

She moves on to vocabulary. In order to find the vocabulary for “The Peculiar Institution,” she comes from the emotion of the piece. The emotion lies in the gut in this piece so a chest undulation emanates from the gut. It is a wave of grief: contractions and releases of the torso. Activities like trudging in shackles or pushing and being beaten are abstracted into movement. Patti is a tap dancer so she is very rhythmically oriented. She shows me a syncopated trudging step that ends with the arms pulled up behind her back as if her hands are in shackles. She says, “Maybe it’s too tap dance-y. What do you think?” I love it.

We get on our feet and begin to dance and move around the room. Then we get excited. We both end up running all around the room as we are describing things. I love her energy. It is similar to mine. Her aesthetic, however, is quite different. Her emphasis is on spacing, order and formations. I tend toward a messier, more chaotic and visceral stage picture. In the end, I think the blend of our aesthetics is great.



We name the sections according to the music. In the script meetings, we cut the verse in the middle of the song where three white women walk in and sing. She wants to add that section of music back in, changing the lyrics to “oohs and ahhs.” She wants the voices to come from a microphone backstage so we only hear a disembodied angelic choral progression. She thinks the slaves need to get so beaten down that they hear angels and are picked up enough to carry on or fight back. I love it. David told her it would not work, but she still wants to try it. I say the only way we will understand the slaves are hearing angels is if we see them beaten to the edge of death. I suggest the victim/attacker exercise. Then we can crawl or fall on the auction block where the angels can begin. Patti has created movement for the following section in which the slaves move in and away from the auction block as if the block is pulling the slaves back.

Patti is really worried about the auction block. The fact that this set has no levels is driving her nuts. It means that we have to come up with every movement and every story in the show. But we can't use mime. So we have to create ten different worlds out of nothing. I think she is afraid there will be nowhere to go from number to number and it will all look the same. She is stuck on the question of what the auction block looks like. David says that it can look however she needs it to look. I guess she is frustrated at the lack of a structured set because she has nothing to create levels or play with that will give the actors something to do. She is used to working on shows that have realistic sets or at least levels and “stuff.” The place is already there and she creates a number in it. In this show, there is no place, so we have to create it as an integral part of the number.

We find out that the auction block will be on a track all the way upstage. It is situated too far up to do anything on the block for very long. I suggested we abstract the game “Red Rover” in which the slaves try to escape the block and are constantly thrown back into it by other slaves. It was based on the fact that some slaves beat and governed other slaves on the plantations. We thought that would make sense. We end the number on the block – the actors standing in the same positions they started. It has the structure of a dream sequence.

I had another idea to separate the men and women on the diagonal -- women up right and men down left -- and have them move toward each other. Bessie and Toler would face each other as she sings about her man being stolen from her bed. For me, it is the personification of the threatening gaze of the black men. Maybe the men can turn that gaze to the audience. It is a social condition that we all understand consciously or unconsciously.

Patti and I have been dancing around the room. We’ve broken it down into musical sections, naming what happens and where. I write everything down in my script. I take it upon myself to do the notation for this. We never designated what I would do, but I just jump in and do I think might help her most.

David comes in at the end of our session. We run through it and he says he likes it. We are so getting excited. When we are both excited, we are on the right track. Patti seems to be using that as her gauge.

Patti is normally so organized. I think she is irritated with herself for not completing the numbers months before rehearsal. This is a great lesson in organization

because I am not usually as together as she. I love working with Patti and David. I am learning so much as a part of the team. I am offering ideas and we are using some of them or cleaning them up.

At 2:00 we went to hear the sing through. I cried so many times. Christina and Angie were laughing at me. This is a wonderfully emotional show. The songs are so beautiful and the kids are singing so well they bring life and joy to the music. I feel great about this show.

#### February 6, 2005

I met with Patti from 10:00am-3:00pm. We go over “A House Divided” one more time. We like it. Then we go through “The Peculiar Institution” and write everything down. There are a couple of parts that are going to be really hard to draw or figure out so we leave them.

#### February 7, 2005

We began staging “The Peculiar Institution.” I was really excited about doing the number. Patti gathered everyone together and went through the shape and story of the number. Patti placed the actors in positions on the auction block. She is really specific about spacing. She asks the stage manager to tape numbers on the perimeter of the rehearsal floor. Patti needs to see the specific poses on the block. It seems like we are getting stuck on such a minor detail, I find myself getting anxious about time. We worked the minutiae of the first few moments. I understand that you have to see the movement because it is difficult to keep up with 11 people moving at once. We worked whether the

contraction was too slow or fast. She slowed it down to half –time. She was very specific about the contractions.

I thought the choreography part would go faster then we could arrange and play. The kids were great and they jumped in completely. I have got to work on being clearer. I hope I'm assisting her correctly. We didn't finish the number and we ended the evening unsatisfied with it. It is very dance-y. We need pictures from Jessica of slaves around an auction block. Jessica says they have to feel the emotional connection at the beginning. I think the majority of people don't know how to abstract or physicalize what they are feeling. Everyday positions suddenly become self-conscious. David says he likes the story. It is really clear. The beginning at the block needs to be asymmetrical. We need to be specific with hands. We will finish it tomorrow.

February 8, 2005

I am exhausted today. I met with Patti at 5:00. I didn't leave until 11:30. We need to make changes to "The Peculiar Institution." David is in for a few minutes and he has pictures of people at an auction block. I need to get those from him. After he leaves, I sit and talk with Patti about "The Peculiar Institution" for a while. First we have to rearrange the first picture so it is thinned out. Patti says only 5 people should be on the block. The others will be grouped as if they are in the holding pens. The semi-circle needs to change as well. .

We have 2.5 hours with "The Peculiar Institution." We are not moving fast enough. Allen Suddeth calls this the shopping method. We stage something to see if we like it. It is the way that I like to work. How else do you find the right thing? It is a

collaborative process rather than dogmatic direction. We keep making it simpler and paring it down. The question is, “How can I create something that is simple in the first place?”

Patti keeps saying it looks too busy. I don’t always agree, but there are times I can see she is right. There is no rule determining when something needs to be thinned out. I suppose we can assume that everything needs to be cut down to the bare minimum. We are looking for an economical way to tell the story.

Patti has little terms for things. “Exchange program” is the term she uses when two people need to switch positions with each other. “The rice peel-off story” refers to a choreographed peel-off (*read*: pilaf) from a single line. It’s funny and it gives the actors a reference point from which to work. While Patti works with one group; I work with another to make use of the time. At the end of the allotted time, we still are not finished and the Red Rover bit does not work. I am so disappointed. Oh well, another show.

David is sure it will take us very little time to finish it if we go back from the top and make the correct adjustments. He says it will happen organically. Patti keeps saying, “No, it won’t.” Their styles are similar in their willingness to try things and make changes on the spot. Their approaches to planning and aesthetics are quite different. David doesn’t usually like clean lines. I may only agree with him because I’ve trained with him for three years. I usually think his notes and suggestions are dead on.

# “IF PRAYIN’ WERE HORSES”

March 21, 2005

During “If Prayin’ Were Horses,” Kim and Geron need to react to the auctioneer’s last “Sold.” They are not reacting enough. Patti says, “You have to look at the auctioneer when he says the line.” They still don’t react. We say, “You need to flinch.” They still don’t react. They start singing and Patti yells, “Stop!” They stop and look at her. Finally! Patti says, “Yes! That’s how you need to look at the auctioneer!” She tricked them into surprise. At the end, they are leaning back in anticipation of the cue for the block to move. They are telegraphing the moment. The block splitting is not a surprise if they subconsciously tell the audience what is going to happen.

# “GREENBACK”

Date not recorded

Patti and I talk about her ideas. Rather than show the sex, she thinks it is a “blanket story.” It’s a Patti-ism meaning, “Sex happens behind a blanket.” Ally has a dark side to her whereas Angie plays the innocent very well. As Patti and I talked about that, we decided that Ally would be the jaded and worn prostitute and Angie would be the newbie. Ally’s arc can move from being bored to being a dominatrix type who likes to push guys around.

Brainstorming:

- If both women are in the blanket with one guy, they could roll down stage together and the guy could crawl out disheveled and happy.

- David had mentioned that one guy could get pushed to the ground and roll to his back. The girls could grab his feet under the blanket and yank him under.
- Autolycus could steal things from the guys' jackets while they are behind the blanket with the women.
- We need sounds from behind the blanket. Sex vocals.

She begins "Greenback" as she typically begins all numbers. She tells Adam, Ally, and Angie the story or shape of the number. She talks about character development first. She asks the three: "How long have they been together. What is their daily life like? What are their relationships to each other? From their characters' points of view, how do they feel about the other two in the trio?"

Patti tells Ally she will be the jaded one. The girls look at each other and laugh. They are surprised because they assumed the opposite based on their costume fittings. Patti says, "Oh really? What do your costumes look like?" The sketches of Angie's costume depict a haggard looking prostitute with slightly unkempt hair and clothes. Ally's sketches are closer to meeting the sexy, stereotypical young prostitute. Patti says, "Okay, so there's a change. C.I.G. Change Is Good!"

Patti has given the "Horseshit and blood flies" line to the naïve character so we have the essence of a "dumb bimbo" character in the number. Patti hopes it will get a laugh. I don't think Ally has the honesty or comedic timing needed to get a laugh out of that line. As a person, Ally is a little too cunning to convincingly play dingy. Her personality, sexuality, and physicality have a heavier weight than the lightness of an archetypical bimbo. I think Angie would do better with the line.

Patti spends a lot of time working with the first three while the four soldiers sit in the hall for thirty minutes waiting for their entrance. When the guys started getting loud in the hall, I asked Patti if I would play with some ways to use the blanket with the guys.

Sometimes I think that the best use of time is to go ahead and play with ideas in order to find vocabulary or a point of departure for the choreography. Danny, Zach, Taylor, Jeff, and I moved to the back of the room to play with some ideas.

Ideas we worked out:

1. Danny falls and the girls reach under the blanket and pull his feet upstage so he disappears behind the blanket.
2. I got in the blanket with Taylor and Danny and we tried to roll over each other inside the blanket. Since the stage is raked, I thought tumbling bodies would be funny. It was painful.
3. We realized that Danny is so short that he could jump to see over the blanket and the guys could lift it up as he jumped to make fun of him.
4. Zach stood behind the blanket and thrust his butt into the sheet to suggest sex.
5. We worked on whether the sheet had to be taut or loose to show images behind it.
6. We figured out how to hold it at angles that would cover sight lines.
7. I went behind the sheet and pawed at it quickly with both hands to suggest that there was a rough encounter happening.
8. We tried to alternate guys to hold the blanket. One guy (A) takes the top edge of the blanket on stage right as the original holder (B) lets go. B keeps turning to his left until he takes the top edges of the stage left side of the blanket from its original



holder (C). B and C were holding the blanket. At the end of the sequence, A and B are holding the blanket.

9. Taylor was behind the blanket with the girls; they grabbed it and pulled it down on top of them. The two guys holding it let go as if it were jerked out of their hands. Taylor and the girls moved around inside the blanket and Taylor stuck his head out and crawled downstage. The girls wrapped the blanket around themselves as if they had no clothes on.

We showed these ideas to Patti. She thought it was great. She was worried that her blanket idea would not work. This helped her see that it will work brilliantly! The guys had a great time figuring out blanket ideas. This will be the funniest number in the show. Thank God, because the show needs some relief from ballads.

March 8, 2005

Tonight we worked "Greenback." Zach did not show up until after 8:00 so I had to stand in for him. I was tired and didn't have a chance to eat so I was feeling irritated and trying not to let it show. My food was on the table and Patti accidentally knocked it off while they were working. I was stupid to me it leave open. I know Patti felt bad. I got really irritated. I hope I was still nice to Patti. She was so kind. She asked stage management to run and replace my food.

It is a silly thing to make note of, perhaps, but I realize that there are some lessons in that small happening. If anything can spill, go wrong, etc. it will because everyone's focus is in the same place, the stage picture. Patti always has a gracious and caring attitude. It shows in her work and spirit. I was just grumpy. Patti and David were so

focused that a tiny incident like that did not distract the cast from what they were doing. Being tired, hungry and running constantly is an essential part of the work. How you deal with it is what determines your character and the energy you contribute to the room. I had to make myself breathe and realize that it was no big deal. Again, it is a small thing, but everything you do and every reaction you have reflects how you live your life. David simply handed money to Patti and they took care of it. I know directors who will let something stupid like that throw them into a rage.

“Greenback” was tedious. David thought it was good, but that there was too much going on at the same time. He and Patti are cleaning the number. Before tonight, the number was about the extraneous events happening while Adam was singing, but they did not allow Adam to tell the story of the song. I realize now the song needed to breathe a bit more. Adam needed to drive the action to fulfill his need to sing the song. If it is all about a con game, Adam needed to instigate the situation and be in the middle of the game at all times.

David needed to change the focus and direction of the number to make it about one thing rather than a bunch of funny activities. In the end, it is much better because we see Autolycus manipulate the situation and create his own opportunities rather than letting everything happen around him. David and Patti are both so detailed that we spent 45 minutes going over the moment when the boys enter to the beginning of Adam’s line, “Boys, women like that don’t go bad till later in life.” David worked everything from vocals and emotional reactions to precision of Taylor’s feet when Jeff shoves his face into Ally’s bosom.

Because it is comedy, everything is incredibly sharp. When the guys don't do it right, David stops them immediately and makes them do it again. We ended up running behind schedule, of course, but this detail work is the only way to make a decent number a good number. Not only does David demand excellence from them, he will not accept anything but his best work at all times. Nothing is ever good enough. It is like the sculptor who keeps chiseling until he finds the exact shape that the rock was meant to be. This way, he finds the true life in it.

Comedy requires finding the simplicity and essence of each moment. David and Patti picked the one funny thing that is happening at each moment and adjusted everything else to highlight that moment. Ultimately, one thing happens at a time so that each thing has a different value. Patti makes every moment count in the music. It is as if the music was written to the action, not the action to the music. She is almost mathematical about it. An example of the way that Patti and David work is that David set, directed, and defined the beats of the event as Patti musicalized them.

David's beats:

Jeff grabs Taylor and pulls him downstage opposite Ally.

Jeff is standing between Taylor and Ally, blocking Taylor's view.

Taylor physically says, "What do you need?" (Innocently)

Jeff turns Taylor's hat around.

Jeff steps aside (upstage) and smiles at Ally.

Taylor sees Ally.

Jeff grabs Taylor's head.

Taylor physically says, “Oh My God!”

Jeff shoves Taylor into Ally’s breasts

Taylor makes muffled sound while keeping his feet still and hands out to the sides.

Taylor grabs Ally’s hips.

Taylor pulls away from her turning upstage.

That description may seem overly detailed, but it is amazing when Patti name a musical count for each acting beat. She marries it to a musical beat, word, or count so it becomes choreography. The action becomes as precise and integral to the music as a tap step would be.

#### March 23, 2005

David decided to work the beginning of “Greenback” because he is so unhappy with it. It is comedy, so every moment must be crisp and clean. He worked the “Help!” moment to designate each beat. He told Adam to follow these steps:

1. Raise his hands to his mouth.
2. Shout upstage.
3. Drop his hands and wait for the guys to come.
4. Realize they aren’t responding.
5. Grab his knee and shout.
6. Turn his head slightly to look and see if they are coming.
7. Realize they are not.
8. The girls shout.
9. Adam turns to look at them.

10. Adam turns his head to look back to see if guys are coming.
11. Adam turns back to the girls with a look that says “See it didn’t work!”
12. They guys count 4 seconds from the girls’ shouts and run out screaming.
13. Adam throws his hands up to stop them. Surprised.

It took forever and Adam never quite got it. David drilled the moment over and over. That took incredible patience. I don’t think David will get what he is asking for from this. It is easy for him, but not for Adam because he is not able to make the choreography honest. He is not filling the moment emotionally. Comedy must be precise and more honest than any other genre. At the end of the night David said he might need to take Adam out of the equation all together. I said Angie is the only one who has the sensibility to carry that scene. The girls were much more interesting after Patti added a subtle motor (to the music), especially when they were standing in one place. I wonder if there is any way to hand the “help” moment to her. When will we have time to work on it?

### “Judgment Day” Battle

February 18, 2005

#### “Judgment Day” Battle Counts – First Draft

	St. Rt. Freeze	St. Lft. Freeze	All Turn In
1/8	1	5	7, 8
	Hold	Rotate Turntable	
2/8	1-4	5-8	

3/8 Continue rotation

4/8 Continue rotation

	Rush to center	Freeze	Shot on either & (?)
5/8	3	5	7 & 8 &

David worked with the guys in Schaeffer Street Playhouse 201 so I did not see how the battle evolved. I know he worked backward. He had to create the picture he wanted at the end, then back up and define each picture that built up to that. Then he could connect the two pictures. David said that he did not know how to move them from the prayer into the battle freezes so he asked the actors what they thought. They had a few ideas. Zach suggested that they run into place one by one when the captains tell them to move into battle. During the last phrase before the battle, they run into place and freeze in “guard” position as if they were standing in a battle line. David tried it and it worked.

David trusts that if he can’t figure it out, someone will offer an idea. It gives them ownership in the process and allows for more ideas. David makes sure that they move in straight diagonal lines to get to their places. Maintaining the military linear movement adds a sharpness and combative edge to it. David designates that they get into places at different intervals. One person moves, then 2, then 1, then 3, etc. It keeps the pace erratic and unpredictable so that the freezes are a surprise.

The shape of the battle that matched the counts above was:

- Stage right freezes facing downstage in mid-attack or mid-wound pose. Ex. Person on st. right (A) freezes in a lunge bayonet attack.
- Stage left freezes facing downstage in mid-attack or mid-wound pose. Ex. Person on st. left (B) freezes in the middle of being stabbed in the stomach.
- The two halves of the stage turn in toward each other to complete the picture. In the example, we see that A is stabbing B.
- Then everyone begins to move clockwise as if they were on a turntable. Only the legs move very slowly. Everything else remains frozen.
- When the table stops, the action resumes and they freeze again. We hear a shot and Jason (Nathaniel) falls on top of Chase (Sam).

Patti says that the music is so even that beginning in the middle of a phrase of music will add to the surprise of the whole thing. She says we have to start in a different place in each eight count. Thus the turn in on 7, 8 of the first 8, the rush on 3, and the shot on the weaker beat (&). The final, ultimate surprise, the shot, has to happen just before or just after we expect it to musically happen. The element of surprise is inherent in syncopation.

After we work the battle for a while, it is still not working the way he wants. He decides to change it during the next rehearsal. Again, he is simplifying his work.

Now, the shape is the following:

- Stage right freezes facing downstage in mid-attack or mid-wound pose. Ex. Person on st. right (A) freezes in a lunge bayonet attack.

- Stage left freezes facing downstage in mid-attack or mid-wound pose. Ex. Person on st. left (B) freezes in the middle of being stabbed in the stomach.
- The two halves of the stage turn in toward each other to complete the picture. In the example, we see that A is stabbing B.
- Then everyone begins to move clockwise as if they were on a turntable. Only the legs move very slowly. Everything else remains frozen. Chase and Jason split the axis of the rotation in the center.
- When the table stops, everyone freezes. We hear a shot and Jason (Nathaniel) falls on top of Chase (Sam) as everyone comes to life.

We tried to keep approximately the same counts. The fourth 8 was deleted and they froze on next 1 count. So the counts became:

	St. Rt. Freeze	St. Lft. Freeze	All Turn In
1/8	1	5	7, 8

	Hold	Rotate Turntable
2/8	1-4	5-8

3/8 Continue rotation

	Freeze	Shot
5/8	1	3



It cleared up the focus and removed a step that was not necessary to the story. Less is more. It still lacked clarity for some reason. Patti suggested that we make the counts even with the music. It would be easier to follow and would give the audience more time to catch up with each thing. The picture is so detailed that there is a lot for the audience to take in as they absorb the whole story. So, we change the counts again.

	St. Rt. Freeze	St. Lft. Freeze	
1/8	1	5	
	Turn in	Freeze	Hold
2/8	1-4	5	6-8
	Rotate turntable		
3/8	1		
4/8	Continue rotation		
	Freeze	Shot	
5/8	1	3&	

This way everything is married evenly to the music. The only surprise is the shot. It highlights the shot. The syncopation stands out even more. I worked with the guys on

clicking in and out of the phrases. It became much easier for them to do because they felt the move in the music. David said that when the shot happens, everything should speed up suddenly. I chose to add a quick movement either away from or in the same direction as the freezes. It needed one big jolt to let the audience know something big happened and to physicalize the men's sudden emotional awakening to the reality of the moment. It is as if they were in the middle of a battle where violence is routine, and suddenly realized that they just killed or hurt another human. The jolt into reality gives them reason to sing, "And sometimes it's too much to bear...." The number works better.

March 23, 2005

It feels like we are running a marathon and the finishing line keeps moving farther away with every step. We are all so tired. David came in tonight and said that he figured out the "Judgment Day" battle between 5 and 8 am. I think neither he nor Patti is getting any sleep.

I stayed in B72 with David to work "Judgment Day," "How Many Devils?" and "Oh! Be Joyful!" He needs me to run the counts. We worked on the battle. He and Patti decided that something was missing in the structure of the battle. There was no emotional impact because it was so pretty. It needed to get messy. He asked everyone to continue fighting for about four seconds after their battle freezes. They created their own choreography by finishing the action in which they froze. David told certain people to fall. Before today, only Tommy, Rob, and Jason were falling. Now Jeff, Graham, Zach, and Brian end up on the ground. He also added vocals. Essentially, we unfreeze and continue

a real-time battle where people are dodging bullets, reacting to the sounds of the battle, and fighting their opponents to the ground.

The battle works so much better. The picture is chaotic and the vocals really engage the audience. It is more visceral. David asked them to continue breathing and moaning in pain until Brian began singing. Now, we understand the horror and there is a reason for them to sing the last bit of the song. It also helps us move into “Tell My Father.” The audience had to feel the devastation of the war before they were ready to move on to sorrow and then resolve. David filled in the missing emotional steps that were necessary to transition to the next moment

“FREEDOM’S CHILD”

February 12, 2005

We need to distinguish among the three big African-American ensemble numbers. The song “River Jordan” is a journey. “Someday” is a church service. What is “Freedom’s Child?” Patti thinks we keep “Freedom’s Child” relatively still and small in contrast to the other two numbers. The circumstance of the song is Douglass talking to the slaves.

Issues:

1. Where are we? Why are we there?
2. If we are meeting in the woods, what does that look like?
3. We did “ography” (Patti-ism for: “Choreography”) in “The Peculiar Institution” and “Someday,” so we can’t do that in “Freedom’s Child.”

4. We don't have anything for people to sit on or change levels, so we don't know how to stand people around so that Douglass can be seen for his bit.

Patti develops an idea, a "hook" to solve those issues. The slaves come in and sit around Douglass and he tells them they can be free. The hook is a secret meeting in the woods where Douglass rallies the slaves to a cause. Since the onus is on Douglass now, the others cannot sing until after "Letters Black and Strong." He needs time to convince them. Patti wonders if we need to divide up the vocals even more so individual people have moments to shine at the end. We tell the story that all of the slaves are convinced that freedom is possible. As written, only Dustin and Lumumba have extra solos. Do we need a "show business play-off thing" to get us off stage? That is planned for "Someday" or "River Jordan." What happens on the "take-it-home thing" where Dustin's and Lumumba's solos happen? We need a motor in the body for this number but not sure where the motor comes from.

February 15, 2005

The first rehearsal was a bust. There was nothing happening. Douglass was just singing at the people seated on the ground. Then we didn't know how to get them off the ground. Marcus does not fill each moment so we have to define everything. We looked at the picture of Marcus in the middle and two people on each diagonal leading to the voms. I tried to create a swirl into those positions, but everyone just ran into each other. We took a break.

Blanton starts playing a beat on the keyboard. They all get up and start dancing. Patti says, "This is what you do on Broadway when the choreographer gets stuck and

doesn't know what to do. You have the pianist jam for a bit and everyone dances, let's off a little steam, and has fun. That way, if the producers walk in, it still looks like you are working and still on the clock. It burns time. If questioned, the choreographer can always say she was giving them some freedom to create their own dance steps in the piece."

That's great. This is so discouraging. Finally, we have David come in to watch what little there is to show.

He asks Blanton, Jessica, Patti, and I to stay after he dismisses the cast. We brainstorm about "Freedom's Child." Jessica has some great ideas. We start riffing off each other. We add lanterns and have the slaves start the secret meeting. Jessica says that pamphlets would be sewn into clothes that would be handed down to the slaves and they might read about Douglass's speech. We look at the words in the song. "Won't you write them again in letters black and strong?" Maybe it is a secret study session where people are learning to read. What is the story? How do we set it up?

We collectively decide that the slaves all meet at night in the woods to share information with each other. One slave brings a pamphlet he found. He tries to read it to the others. That would have been dangerous. Exter (Lumumba) brings Douglass to the secret meeting to convince them that they can be free. Not everyone knows who Douglass is. Some people can read and some can't. Some are reluctant to listen to him. Others could begin to sing when he asks them to read the pamphlet. They sing the words on the pamphlet. As people get excited, Douglass begins handing out flyers that people take back to their quarters and spread around. He quiets them at the end and they run off as Douglass sends them home. The final picture is Douglass standing alone center stage after he has

sent everyone off to carry the message of freedom. We hear the last notes as the chorus sings them from the vomms. Exter takes him away.

This is great! We finally left at 12:45, but we created a great story together. It is intriguing and based in history. David, Patti, Jessica, and I laughed the whole way to the car because we were so excited. The dissemination of pamphlets at a secret meeting is the hook!

Blanton has to work out the end vocally because our ending quiets them down and thins the sound out. It is written to end in a big chorus. Blanton is worried it won't work. He agrees to do it, but says we are fighting the music.

"I NEVER KNEW HIS NAME"

February 18, 2005

Patti and David spend forever deciding the music that will underscore the Nurse/Hospital entrance before "I Never Knew His Name." We need a transition to change the mood. No transition music is provided. Blanton suggests putting in "Brother, My Brother," but we haven't heard that song in the show yet. Patti says we have to do something we have already heard. She says if you use new music as a transition or intro, the audience thinks a new number has begun. In this case, we still have to get through the nurse's monologue and the soldier's death scene. We put in the "Home is the constant" theme from "A House Divided" because they've already heard it and it sets the tone for "I Never Knew His Name." That is a great lesson!

## “SOMEDAY”

February 14, 2005

Patti and I met to plan “Someday.” “Someday” is a church scene. How do we get people onstage? Do they all just come in singing? Patti wants them in lines as if in pews. I suggest that everyone can file in from up right and left as if they are walking through church aisles. They can filter into the pews as Joy and Kim are singing. This will help us get into church, and then Joy can turn and take Kim “in” to the church that is already set up behind them.

Patti looked at different movements. She saw a video where a woman had her hands crossed in front of her. The arms were crossed at the wrists, held tightly into the sternum, and the hands and fingers were open and long. The hands were shaking as if shaking a tambourine. Patti showed me the sign language for “freedom.” Hands are in fists, crossed at the wrists in front of the sternum. Then they open up, palms facing forward, moving just outside the width of the shoulders. It is as if you had shackles on your wrists and pulled your wrists apart. It is perfect for “We’re gonna break these chains.”

Other images include:

1. Hands held in prayer.
2. Hands reaching up for God.
3. Hands pushing down the Devil. Pushing the Devil away.
4. Frenzied, I’ve-Got-the-Spirit, running.
5. Rocking back and forth. Feeling the spirit.

6. Whole torso tilts in a circle as the head rolls. It is as if the head and heart are overwhelmed and being swept away with the spirit of God. Patti calls this move “holy rolling.”
7. Testifying on our knees.
8. Being healed, or fainting from being touched by God.
9. Similar to Pentecostal services or African-American churches. Like the film *The Apostle*.

Patti creates vocabulary for the number from photographic and film images, research, and sign language, and her own attempts to physicalize the emotion that she feels in the number. When she finds a step, she deconstructs it or finds variations of it.

Particularly in this number, she names every movement by its intention. For example, she moves across the room from left to right in a “pony-like” step. She pushes down with her hands on the right side of her body as she says, “Get that Devil away from me.” Then sweeps her arms up in a counter-clockwise motion twice as she says, “Help me, Jesus! Help me!” She talks it in rhythm and gives each step a name. This makes it easier to remember and it defines the emotional intention of the movement. This way, nothing is just vocabulary or an arbitrary move. Every movement has a meaning and emotional connection because that is how Patti experiences movement.

We then sat down to map out the pictures. I drew some pictures and we looked at them:

1. 3 people in stage right pews, 4 people in stage left pews. Two people in each row.  
Two rows.



2. Then the whole church rotates with Joy as the axis so we all are facing stage left.
3. Then we file out of the pews down the center isle. They split and meet each other in a big circle.
4. Then we run to our “Testify groups.” Three in one group up right, three in one group center left, two in down right group. Joy is in the middle and she walks around the groups as they testify.
5. A group gathers down right and Joy lays hands on Tamarisk and the guys lift her up and carry her diagonally up left.
6. Joy comes to get them and they parade down right on the diagonal and peel-off (Patti says, “rice peel-off” as in rice pilaf!) into a big formation where they begin to run around and get the spirit. I draw the formation in triangles and in a big rectangle. The formation changes like a kaleidoscope with each phrase.

This is exciting! We think it will work.

March 9, 2005

Last night Jessica told Patti, David, and I that the African American Ensemble doesn’t want to do “Someday” as choreographed. They feel like they are making fun of black people and that, essentially, we are requiring them to play a stereotype that they find degrading. They said the moves are like those of a minstrel show.

This week, Dr. T hosted a performance of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin Deconstructed” by her troupe from Seattle, Washington. A few of our cast members saw the performance in which actors wore blackface and whiteface makeup. The show examined racism and used minstrelsy as a vehicle to point out the socially constructed archetype of black people. In

the show, the actors performed very repetitive and simplistic choreography that included the use of “jazz hands” and smiling people. Somehow, the actors in *The Civil War: A Musical* connected those movements to the movements in “Someday.”

Jessica said that she came up with a solution. They would all take a field trip to find the charismatic worshipers like the ones on which we modeled “Someday.” I was angry and said that that was fine, but that the fact is they are actors. We don’t have to justify something we do by comparing it to real-life behavior. That is why we do theatre! It is not real-life, but an impression of aspects in real life. The music dictates we do the kind of number we have choreographed. It made me furious, because the whole discussion was one of self-consciousness, self-righteousness, fear, and hate.

The choreography was not working because they would not take a risk and allow themselves to fully embody the spirit of the number. Instead, it was coming across as hollow, unmotivated, and internal. Patti’s struggle with a number that should be so simple is the fact the actors were, for the most part, acting as though they resented being on stage. In addition, the actors were upset because David told them they could not cry on stage. Let the audience cry. We don’t want to see actors in therapy. It becomes self-indulgent and they are no longer sharing a story with the audience. They are internalizing it and holding on to it. Essentially, actors wallow in tears because they think they are feeling something, when they are really just shutting down their connection to the audience. Some of the actors felt entitled to display their emotions, regardless of the fact that it pulled focus from the soloists during “The Peculiar Institution.”

Tonight, Patti took them in a room and addressed the issue before rehearsal. She let them know that she had no intention of mocking them or propagating racial stereotypes. She said the music and the show demand an extreme level of commitment from them that she has not yet seen. She explained that the moves are not simply choreography. They mean something. “Help me Jesus. I need you.” They have to feel that in order to fill the choreography. They sat around and talked and finally understood the level of commitment needed to make the number successful. I hope all this angst is finished for now. Ultimately, we all must honor the script or song and its intention.

March 25, 2005

I took the night off. Patti called me at 11:30 to tell me the run was amazing. Evidently, the African-American cast decided to pray between each number. She said they finally found the spirit of “Someday.” They cried after the number because they were so inspired. I hate I missed that. They found what they and we were looking for during the last run-through. I know Patti was relieved. David continued the dry tech and got through “Judgment Day.”

“HOW MANY DEVILS?”

March 23, 2005

I stayed in B72 with David to work “Judgment Day,” “How Many Devils?” and “Oh! Be Joyful!” We started to work “How Many Devils?” because I worked with them last night on emotional connection to the solos. I don’t think I was successful. I asked David to work with them again so I could see how he would work to get more out of them.

He watched them run it once and said he thought all his work could be done with Blanton at the piano. He went through each solo and asked them to put their anger, frustration, and pain into the words and their bodies. When Jeff sang, David asked him to punch the consonants more. Taylor sang his solo and Blanton asked him to hit the “D” in “die.” Jaiké was doing good work. David told him so. Tommy sang and Blanton asked him to take it up an octave. Tommy was scared of it. He could hit the notes, but he had to work to get there. Blanton said the stress involved in hitting the notes would read as stress in the character. It worked so much better.

Later, I asked Brian to work with Tommy to help him technically on the solo. Tommy was pulling his chin up to hit the higher notes. That would ultimately damage his chords and make him tired. I then talked to Tommy and asked if he would mind working with Brian. He said he would be happy to work with anyone who might help him improve. I then pulled both of them together and asked them to work on the solo sometime. Asking an actor to coach another actor in the show is a touchy request. I think asking them separately, then together alleviated any problems.

David worked the “How many miles? How many fears?” chorus section. He pointed out this was the first time anyone had asked a question like that so they needed to punch those questions and demand answers. Working Brandon’s solo, David told him there was nothing going on his eyes. Brandon was way too casual. David made him do it over and over again, punching the “P” in “Pick em’ up and put em’ down again.” and “D” in “do.” Finally, Brandon gave more energy to the solo. He is so non-present it is maddening. Unfortunately, we were running low on time and did not get to work Danny’s

solo. He is not confident singing that line. I will ask him to work with Brian, too. That may be a little harder for him to do because his ego is more fragile than Tommy's.

“OH! BE JOYFUL!”

February 20, 2005

Patty's ideas for “Oh! Be Joyful!” The guys are on sentry duty. They get tired. Maybe one falls asleep? One guy is the perfect soldier. One guy is the show off. The show-off could kick the sleeping guy and mess with him a bit. Since Ally is the dominatrix, maybe she wrenches a guy's ear to get him to his knees so she can pour liquor down his throat.

We begin staging. Jeff, Taylor, and Zach enter up right. March in on a quick 8 count. Guns in “shoulder arms.”

Attention	About Face (Jeff faces St. Rt.)
	(Zach faces St. Lft.; Taylor faces Dn. Ctr.)
1/8    1	5, 6, 7, 8
March	About Face
2/8    1 ->	6, 7, 8
March	About Face
3/8    1 ->	6, 7, 8

Drums Fade Out

March 9, 2005

Patti is thinning the number out to make the “Weight Watchers Version.” Change is good! She wants to see what the girls are doing and try to work Autolycus into the number as in “Greenback.”

First, she cut the back and forth bit because it was unnecessary. She worked to tone down Ally and Zach’s exchange. She decreased the amount of beat-driven movement. When I saw what she was doing, I worked with Jeff and Angie to do the same. Simplify everything. She made the edges softer so that we could pay more attention to Autolycus and Taylor. She added a way for Autolycus to take the money each time. It is much better.

We also had to take the air out of the allemande. It needed to appear naturally so the pattern of the dance would seem accidental. I thought it would help if Angie ended up between two guys they could struggle over her and throw each other into the allemande pattern. I’m not sure Patti thought it would work, but it timed out perfectly. I still don’t like Zach’s fall. There is no reason for it, but we didn’t have time to change it.

Patti highlights some of Autolycus’ lines with little moments of stillness or by asking everyone to look at him on a line. This is the process of getting to the necessary action. Simplifying. She always asks me, “Is that okay?” when she makes a change to anything I did. I’m surprised that she remembers who choreographed what. Of course it is okay! I’m learning so much from her. It feels like crunch time for Patti and David lately,

so I am actually trying to offer less and keep quiet more. It feels weird, but I think it is what I need to do to help them.

March 23, 2005

David and I worked with “Oh! Be Joyful!” We went through and musicalized each moment in the number. David fixed the acting beats. He coached Adam through the beginning. It was so much better. He asked Adam to find desperation in the fact he has to work harder to sell liquor to these guys. Adam quickly turns the desperation to anger because it is an easier emotion to find. David warned him that he should not go toward anger because it will not allow the audience to laugh.

Musicalizing everything was fun. I have never worked that precisely. There was one moment I internally panicked because it was not working: after Angie crossed under Jeff and Taylor’s arms, she turned and grabbed Taylor as Ally grabbed Jeff. The girls needed to exchange a look before they went into the allemande. I had trouble naming the order of events for a moment. I felt panic because I wasn’t sure I could figure it out. I took a breath and made myself work step by step until we got it right. Each move and lyric had to be named.

Likewise, I asked Adam to throw Zach to the floor on the “Joyful” before “Save my ass.” He got the timing, but something was still off. I asked Adam to keep spinning stage left and stop before “Save my ass.” The fall finally looked like a deliberate attack. I had started to hate the fall, but it became clear and focused once we musicalized it. David had to go the other room and he asked me to see if they could pass the flasks during the allemande section. The actors and I worked out a way to pass the flask during the do-si-do

section. Someone is able to take the flask from each soldier just as he goes to take another drink. It is okay, not great. David wanted the guys to appear drunk so he wanted them to drink one more time. I don't really see how that can happen. It was worth a try and the cast was great at figuring it out.

When the guys die in the ambush after the number, the guns cue goes on for 3 minutes. That is a long time to die. I worked with them to help define how each one is killed so they can make it specific and slow their pace a little.

“RIVER JORDAN”

February 28, 2005

The song is written about the slaves to taking a journey to freedom via the Underground Railroad. The truth of such a difficult journey is completely contrary to the upbeat tone of the music. Patti keeps saying, “I just want to cut this number.” David says we have to keep the song because it is the only upbeat number in the second act.

Patti says we need to start small. The song starts in a cotton field. A maximum of five people can be onstage at the beginning. If everyone is onstage the whole time, we will have to parade a bunch of people around the stage. Patti says it might look like “a chorus line or the merry villagers.”

The first “Hold On” section has a “shush factor.” Benjamin tells people to slow down and stay with him. He is the only one that knows the way.

Patti wants Toler to enter from upstage right in shadow up because it is the strongest position for an entrance. On the second “Hold on,” Benjamin sees someone who



may be dangerous and makes the others stop. Bessie recognizes Toler and she breaks through the crowd to run to him. They hug each other center stage.

The movement is about the terrain. I tell Patti about the neutral mask journey. I show her how the mask moves through water, sand, and forest; how it climbs the mountain, reaches the top of the mountain, then rushes down the mountain and reaches its destination. She likes it. We decide to borrow the mask movement.

We name the terrain the slaves will encounter. First they have to jump over a river. The “Hold On” section can be about someone having trouble getting to the other side. Benjamin tells that person to continue on. Then we add one person to the group. They enter the forest and have to go over logs, under branches, and between trees. Then they run down an *s*-shaped road. The terrain of the journey is based on how we move from one area of the stage to another. So far we moved in a diagonal from down right to up left, a horizontal line upstage from left to right. Patti says a zigzag would be good so we run down the road. We huddle down left as Toler enters up right. Toler and Bessie’s reunion spur a celebration.

Benjamin’s intention is the idea we’re almost there. He begins a sequence of steps based on the excitement they all feel. Step right, rock front, back, front, ball change, step left slow, step right quick, step left quick, four quick walks, start over. This step changed a zillion times! The step carries them from up left to down right and curves upstage until they reach center stage where they can see the Canadian border. They all stop a moment and take it in. Then they rush down stage, step over the border, turn upstage and wave to Benjamin in appreciation.

Patti and I think we have something. I sit down and draw it out. We decide who will be added and where. This is very scary because the journey has to be acted and Dustin has to lead it. So far, we haven't seen Dustin act well enough to convince us he can do this. Without steps, it is actor-heavy. With steps, it is The Wizard of Oz. This is the most ridiculous song.

We go in and teach it to them. It is like pulling teeth. We can't tell if the hook will work because they are not actually seeing or acting anything. It feels like we are just traipsing all over the place willy-nilly. We spend eight hours on it. Patti is really discouraged. She starts working on detailed movement instead of getting through the whole thing quickly. I think it's because she is not sure it will work. She wants to see some sort of product on which she and David can decide yea or nay. It is an exhausting day.

During our ten-minute break, Patti asks Blanton to play something funky. She gets us in a circle to jam a bit. I am sick as a dog, but I step in the middle and act like a fool. Kim has her arms crossed and is reluctant to join in. Finally we are all sweating and being stupid. Patti says, "Why did I do this?" Someone says, "To get us to have energy?" Patti says, "I see you giving this much energy and more during breaks, but I don't see any of that when we are working on this piece. Now you know you *can* do it, so *do* it." Patti really laid down the law.

To get them to "popcorn" their vocal cut-off before Toler comes in, Patti stops and says, "Tell me what you had for dinner. Everyone at once." Then she "shushed" them.

They stop talking at different times. She points at them saying, “That is what needs to happen.”

Patti decides to add Kim and Toler’s voices on “Pray” to highlight them. Patti finally gets Dustin to lead them more. Patti demonstrates how Dustin should lead them. As she does the traveling step, she says, “We’re almost there....”

When Patti demonstrates, she has a fire-like energy about her. She is present. She talks about having “laser communication” in their eyes. She sends energy out her eyes. It is an external focus that allows her to be so open and exciting to be around. David told me that, after much prodding, she finally told him that Tommy Tune thought she had something more in her than other dancers usually did. As I watch her demonstrate something, I can see that “something” Tommy Tune was talking about. They like the pattern for Hal-le-LU-ia at the end.

Ball-Change Back	Step	Step	Step	Step
			Arms Up	
& 1	2	4	6	8

March 21, 2005

I went into B57 to work on “River Jordan.” Three of ten people in the number were not there. Patti had asked me to go over each step and to name the words that go with the steps. We are in the drilling mode. They have to perform each moment fully.

We talked about the end of “River Jordan” where they improvise the “Hallelujahs.” I asked them what it meant to them. I thought about the viewpoints work and asked them

to create a phrase they could embody. We came up with actions or images for each person. Keith and Joy are being born. They are awakening to the world. Some people are vibrating with the power of freedom. Some are boiling over with excitement. Anthony is free as the wind. Lumumba is touching and digging in the earth. Jacque is reaching and gathering freedom. I don't know, it is a new concept, but maybe it will give the actors more to work with.

## SPACING REHEARSAL

March 20, 2005

It is the first day back from Spring Break. We are in Hodges. We started on a good note. We need to focus and get everyone together. David suggested we do a physical and vocal warm-up since we've been gone so long. David went and got a boom box and music and Patti started a warm-up. Her energy is happy and goofy. It is contagious.

The warm-up started with spine rolls. Then reaches up, front, and down. She changed it up. Now reach to the side in a big arc. Then step, touch. Then isolate shoulders, adding head looks to the right and left. Isolate hips. Add voice. Swim. Shake hands, shoulders, head, legs, knees, and butt. Now split center and form three lines facing each other. They walk in for 4 counts and out for 4 counts. They do the same thing, visually and energetically connecting to each other, then alternate lines. Then we formed a circle.

Patti and Rob started by entering the circle and doing a silly dance with each other. Dancing, moving around. Everybody got really goofy. It was time to show off. It was fun. Everyone was clapping and making whooping sounds. Patti galloped around the inside of the circle clapping to keep the energy up. At the end, David joined in and went into the center with Jessica and the cast went nuts. Then Blanton warmed them up. Then David talked to them. He asked for the grossest moment over break, the funniest moment, and the most heart-warming moment. They all offered comments. Then he talked about this week's schedule and the fact that they still have to go to their night classes this week.

We get started by walking through the numbers. Jessica and I are sitting on the sides. I am sitting in house right, and Jessica in house left.

"The Peculiar Institution" is getting tedious because we don't have 12 feet of upstage area that we normally would have. David speaks up and says, "Marcus paid a lot of money for this moment!" when they are all frozen in their crawling positions. It lightened up the mood. David knows exactly when to lighten things up.

We blocked everything so proscenium oriented that this is taking forever. David and Patti say, "This is new information" when they make a change so the actors stay with them. Some of the actors are writing things down, but I don't know how they are going to remember their marks if they are not all writing it down.

After dinner break, David and Patti talked to the cast and said that they need to be more present while we are doing this. When we stop, their focus needs to be on what David and Patti are saying. It is time for me to step back and simply take direction from them. This is not a time to offer new ideas, but to work out what is already in place.